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**The Interpretation of Ruins at Sites of Memory**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

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**B**y the close of the twentieth century, American historic sites increasingly commemorated periods and events that represent shameful or dark episodes in U.S. history. No longer content to preserve only those parts of the built environment that honor military victories or housed elites, communities began to memorialize labor and immigration history and the history of women and people of color. As a consequence, sites that still have the power to make visitors uncomfortable, such as nineteenth-century factories and slave quarters, were restored and opened for tours. This development in the United States was influenced in part by the growing international focus on what have been called “sites of conscience” or “*lieux de mémoire:*” places of memory and memorial.

Within the past ten years, three such historic sites of conscience that share a common history have been adaptively used as museums. Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, and Manzanar National Historic Site in California all served as housing for marginalized, displaced or imprisoned persons, were abandoned and left to decay, and are now open to the public. All three sites have been chosen to commemorate important periods or events in American social or political history that have not been memorialized as integral parts of U.S. history. Abandoned and forgotten by most, the neglect of the sites led to their deterioration, until they were resurrected by non-profit organizations or the National Park Service to serve as museums or historic sites open to the public. These three sites were chosen for this study because they present similar theoretical



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challenges to their curators. Rather than attempt to restore the sites completely and recreate an imagined past, the sites' managers have elected to allow decayed areas of the sites to remain as testimony to the passage of time, permitting the period of abandonment to remain an integral part of the sites' histories and implicitly acknowledging that the decay contributes to the impact of the sites. At some sites, the visible signs of age and decay make the buildings more evocative for visitors, as the decay represents the period of neglect and perhaps evokes the marginalization of the site's former occupants. At other sites, the decay may serve to distance visitors from the events being interpreted, and diminish the relevance of past events to current concerns. Visitors' perceptions of the decay is relevant to the sites' interpretations, since each of the three sites has a contemporary mission that shapes curatorial decisions to use the "theatre of decay" as an interpretive tool.

This study seeks to evaluate how the interpretation of each of these three sites is shaped by efforts to preserve the existing decay, to incorporate it into the site's message, and to balance the theatricality of the interpretation of this decay with ethical and professional standards of conservation. While a comparison of the three sites serves to illustrate some of their similarities, the sites have dissimilar origins, histories, and contemporary missions. Prisoners, immigrant tenement dwellers, and Japanese-American internment camp detainees all experienced different forms of displacement as a consequence of divergent economic, political, and social factors.



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Chapter Two of this study focuses on the concept of “heritage” as it is used and manipulated at American historic sites, and how the concept of heritage has been applied to sites of uncomfortable history. Museums and memorials have begun to play a more prominent role in helping the public engage with the positive and negative aspects of the past. Tourism exerts a significant influence on the promotion and creation of heritage, and has encouraged a level of theatricality at some historic sites that affects the historic integrity of the site.

Chapter Three addresses the changing perceptions of ruins in Europe and the United States. An examination of theories of ruin and reconstruction in Asia and the Middle East is beyond the scope of this study, since non-European cultures have had less influence on theories of decay in the United States than have England, France, and Italy. Attitudes toward ruins that were created through acts of war differ greatly from attitudes toward ruins that were created through neglect and abandonment. This chapter presents an overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cults of ruins, and assesses their relevance to the three sites studied. This discussion of the aesthetics of decay seeks to shed some light on the extent to which decay lends “authenticity” to the sites or, conversely, serves to symbolize the disjunction between the past and the present.

The subsequent three chapters are devoted to case studies. Of the three sites in this study, one, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, is an institutional founder of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. Tenement



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Museum curators reconstructed several apartments to portray inhabitants' lives during different periods in the building's history, and left one apartment and portions of the hallway in the state of ruin in which they were found in 1988. This site is the only one of the three for which the mission preceded the building. Museum directors sought a site suitable for their plan to create a museum that emphasized a "usable past."

Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site is in an extreme state of deterioration. Stabilization, rather than restoration, is the first priority at the site, which offers historic tours and exhibits site-specific art installations.

The third case study, the Japanese-American internment camp Manzanar, offers the greatest challenge to curators, since most of its buildings were relocated or destroyed when the camp was dismantled after World War II. The chapter on Manzanar National Historic Site will explore the National Park Service's decisions to relocate or reconstruct some elements of the built environment and allow others to remain in ruins in an effort to balance the powerful image presented by the windswept and barren camp with the need to interpret the site in a coherent and instructive way.

The final chapter of this study will present the conclusions drawn from an evaluation of the interpretive goals of each of the three sites.



## Chapter Two: Heritage and History

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In order to assess the increased attention to sites that commemorate uncomfortable history, this study will briefly examine the concepts of heritage and history that guide the interpretation of historic sites in the United States, and the relatively recent shift in interpretation to engage the public in the present-day relevance of less widely embraced aspects of our shared heritages and multiple pasts.

“Heritage” is a contentious term that holds different meanings for different groups. Historians J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, authors of one of the few texts written on the interpretation of uncomfortable history, evaluated the five commonly used definitions of heritage: heritage as a synonym for physical manifestations of the past; heritage as defined by collective memory; heritage as a synonym for culture; heritage as indigenous values or landscapes that can be passed on to successive generations; and the “heritage industry,” which involves the commercialization of an area or craft for tourist revenue. Tunbridge and Ashworth used a marketing model to emphasize that heritage is an inherently selective, culturally constructed product, and that the development of audience demand precedes the development of a heritage site.<sup>1</sup>

In Great Britain and the United States there has been a great deal of scholarship and debate about the term heritage. Historic sites and conservation organizations in both Britain and America use the word “heritage” to define their cultural and historic resources. Because heritage tourism is a significant part of the economies of both

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<sup>1</sup> J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 1-2, 8.



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nations, the preservation of a defined cultural heritage, as reflected in the built environment, is of vital interest to the regions that increasingly depend upon it.

In the United States, the non-profit National Trust for Historic Preservation offers a Heritage Tourism Program to help communities develop heritage tourism. The Trust program equates heritage tourism with an authentic interpretation of the past:

Heritage tourism is travel that allows visitors to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past. It is one of the fastest-growing segments of the travel industry, one that can bring many benefits to travelers and to communities.<sup>2</sup>

The economic imperatives of heritage tourism are made even more explicit by England's equivalent to the National Trust for Historic Preservation: English Heritage. The organization's 1992 report, *Managing England's Heritage: Setting Our Priorities for the 1990s*, emphasized the multiples roles played by heritage:

To understand our past helps us to come to terms with the present and provides the foundations for the future. Our heritage plays an important educational role, but even more importantly, a vital social role. Our heritage also plays an important role in the economy. Tourism is a major producer of invisible earnings for the country. It is our stately homes and historic monuments, our battlefields, our fortresses, our landscapes which draw visitors to our shores and money into our economy. Without these attractions we would be the poorer in more than just the visual sense.<sup>3</sup>

The prevalence of heritage tourism has altered the meaning of the term "heritage" and opened it up to criticism as a vague generalization that sheds little light

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<sup>2</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation web site: [www.nationaltrust.org](http://www.nationaltrust.org).

<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Stevens, *Managing England's Heritage: Setting Our Priorities for the 1990s* (London: English Heritage, 1992), quoted in: W.E. Krumbein, P. Brimblecombe, D.E. Cosgrove, and S. Staniforth, eds., *Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 233.



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on the accurate presentation of the past. Historian B. Goodey asserts that heritage's educational and social roles may be eclipsed by its economic role, noting that since the 1980s, "heritage interpretation" has been packaged to create "heritage attractions" and "heritage experiences."<sup>4</sup> Historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson derides the tendency of heritage interpretation to displace more edifying interpretations of history:

...A kind of historical, theatrical make-believe is becoming increasingly popular; not only the noonday shootouts and other roadside attractions, but costumed guides in historical show places, candlelight concerts of period music, historically accurate dinners and feasts, re-enactments of historic episodes are gradually changing the new reconstructed environments into scenes of unreality, places where we can briefly relive the golden age and be purged of historical guilt. The past is brought back in all its richness. There is no lesson to learn, no covenant to honor; we are charmed into a state of innocence and become part of the environment. History ceases to exist.<sup>5</sup>

The use of history as escapist entertainment is only one facet of heritage interpretation. Some heritage interpretation eschews theatrical display in favor of presenting an "authentic" past to visitors who seek a truer representation of historical events. However, most heritage interpretation may be differentiated from the selective presentation of the past that can be characterized as "history." Historian David Lowenthal distinguishes heritage from history as follows: "History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to

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<sup>4</sup> B. Goodey, "Selling Cultural Heritage: Conflicts and Possibilities," in W.E. Krumbein, et al., *Durability and Change*, 225-239.

<sup>5</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 102.



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infuse them with present purposes.”<sup>6</sup> Of course history, like heritage, is subjective, and what historians and curators select to exhibit and interpret is necessarily infused with present purposes. “Heritage interpretation,” however, goes a step beyond historical scholarship. It has been called “an uneasy mixture between scholarship and marketing hype, fact and nostalgia, educating and entertaining, and monologue and dialogue.”<sup>7</sup> The pressures of tourism intensify the commodification of history, as heritage tourism grows in popularity and economic potential. Critics assert heritage interpretation simplifies history by smoothing over complications, like contested memories and the representation of diverse pasts, that might interfere with an easily consumable experience at historic sites.

Most critics of the term agree that “heritage” fails to encompass diverse cultures and identities. Although many heritage sites do seek to recognize the multiple cultures that participated in the history presented at the site, most sites in the United States still carefully avoid any controversy that could arise from contested interpretations of events and places. The “whitewashing” of negative historical moments or sites has long characterized the American historic landscape. Reflecting the importance of patriotism and nationalism in forming the American collective memory, the majority of historic sites in the United States emphasize the positive contribution to American

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<sup>6</sup> David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hannabuss, “How Real Is Our Past? Authenticity in Heritage Interpretation,” in *Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity*, ed. J.M. Fladmark (Dorset: Donhead Publishing Ltd., 2000), 351.



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history made by the person or events commemorated by the site.<sup>8</sup> James W. Loewen's recent survey of American historic sites led him to conclude:

Guides almost always avoid negative or controversial facts, and most monuments, markers, and historic sites omit any blemishes that might taint the heroes they commemorate, making them larger and less interesting than life.... These misrepresentations on the American landscape help keep us ignorant as a people, less able to understand what really happened in the past, and less able to apply our understanding to issues facing the United States today.<sup>9</sup>

For several decades, historical sites and museums in the United States have been criticized for presenting selective history and failing to acknowledge the connection between the past and the present. The growing popularity of "heritage interpretation" in many ways contributes to the packaging of history as an uncontroversial narrative of a knowable past. Historian Kevin Walsh has stated:

One of the most important effects of heritage has been its intensification of the modern emphasis on promoting the past as that which is entirely complete and removed from the present. This has served to neuter the past and permit its manipulation and trivialization in the present.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of a usable past, described by historian Michael Kammen as a necessary part of shaping national, group, and personal identity, is being employed more and more by public historians who seek to shape the interpretation of the past in new ways. Today, an increasing number of historic sites seek to link the past to the present in order to encourage visitors to see the contemporary relevance of history, and

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 10.

<sup>9</sup> James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 17, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.



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many museums and memorials acknowledge the role they have to play in helping the public confront both the positive and negative aspects of the past.

In addition to allowing visitors a deeper understanding of and connection to historical events, some museums and historic sites actively seek to promote social engagement. The National Park Service recently considered launching an initiative to move beyond its recent efforts at some sites to discover and to tell “untold stories,” and to enhance the process of “civic dialogue” within the parks and monuments under its purview. A National Park Service paper connected with this potential initiative stated:

We want to enable the National Park system to look at our own parks in a different way, not only as keepers of American cultural and natural resources but also as centers for important dialogue on civic issues.<sup>11</sup>

This effort to involve an engaged public in bringing the present into the interpretation of the past can be seen as part of an incipient movement in the United States. Proponents of a new role for museums and historic sites seek to involve local communities in the interpretation and presentation of their histories. Museums like the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City participate in this movement by involving local communities in their interpretation of the past and present experiences of urban life.

Greater participation by the public in their own history may reveal sources of conflict among diverse cultures and viewpoints. These contested histories often play themselves out within contested spaces. For example, at the Lower East Side

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<sup>11</sup> National Park Service, “The National Park Service and Civic Dialogue” (paper prepared for a workshop sponsored by the National Park Service, New York, NY, December 2001).



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Tenement Museum, some local groups have expressed their dissatisfaction with their representation within the museum, which they do not believe accurately represents or interprets the ethnic composition of the neighborhood's past. At Manzanar National Historic Site, Native Americans, Japanese-Americans, and European-Americans each lay a claim to the site's history, and have sought to prevent the primacy of one historic period or defined heritage over another in the National Park Service's interpretation of the site. Museums have begun to play a role in balancing contested histories by mediating controversies in which personal commemoration is at odds with historic interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

A deeper understanding of past and present through civic dialogue and social engagement can be implemented at heritage sites that commemorate as well as heritage sites that celebrate. Edward Linenthal has perceived the role memorials in particular can play in effecting a civic transformation of the public. Asserting that memorial sites have emerged as points of moral order, Linenthal suggested that such sites should play a more active role as institutional agents of moral influence. He suggested the public

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<sup>12</sup> For a more extensive discussion of contested memory, see Edward Linenthal's analysis of successful efforts to achieve a balance between memory and history in the context of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where curators included both commemorative and historical perspectives in consultation with survivors; and less successful efforts surrounding the well-publicized cancellation in 1995 of the Smithsonian Institution exhibit "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," as a result of protests from veterans groups and other critics. Edward T. Linenthal, "Can Museums Achieve a Balance Between Memory and History?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 February 1995.



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should enter museums as “civic pilgrims” and leave transformed and empowered by the moral narrative encountered at the site.<sup>13</sup>

The increased visitation to sites around the world that commemorate events that are to be remembered but not celebrated may reflect an increased willingness on the part of historic site managers and the public to examine as moral narratives the less appealing facets of their shared heritage. These sites range from European concentration camps like Auschwitz (now a World Heritage Site) and other sites of atrocities to sites not explicitly associated with death, but rather with exploitation and marginalization, like the Workhouse in England and the Gulag Museum in Russia. However, it is not clear that these sites of conscience inherently effect the “civic transformation” envisioned by Linenthal. Some historians express concern that sites of particular horror, such as concentration camps, may seem exceptional, with no overt connection to events of the present day. In describing a visit to Auschwitz II at Birkenau, Donald Horne concluded: “When we stand piously in the presence of these ruins, we comfort ourselves by imagining that this is the *past*—never the present, never the future.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, some historians question whether the altruistic intentions of site curators at sites of atrocity and other less horrifying sites are necessarily paralleled by similar morally valuable motives on the part of the visitors, who in

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Linenthal, “September 11<sup>th</sup> and After: Museums, Memory & Meaning” (paper presented to the College of Physicians, Philadelphia, PA, November 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Donald Horne, *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), 247.



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consuming both the education and entertainment offered by the sites may or may not be receptive to the moral message of the site.<sup>15</sup>

Several organizations with distinct human rights agendas have arisen to negotiate such issues and guide interpretation at sites of twentieth-century exploitation and atrocities. The International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, founded in 1999, stated as among its founding principles:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.<sup>16</sup>

In the United States, the National Park Service and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, both discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, are both members of the Coalition. The Coalition subsequently influenced the organization of the International Committee of Memorial Museums of Remembrance for the Victims of Public Crimes, established in 2001, which defined its mission as follows:

The purpose of the memorial museums is to commemorate the victims of state and socially determined, ideologically motivated crimes. These institutions frequently are located at the original historical sites, or at places chosen by the victims of such crimes for the purpose of commemoration. Their endeavours to convey information about historical events are morally grounded and aim to establish a definite relationship to the present, without abandoning historical perspective.<sup>17</sup>

Coalitions such as these recognize that every historic site that claims to represent the heritage of a nation or particular population interprets the site through a lens of

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<sup>15</sup> Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth J. Abram, "Planting Cut Flowers," *AASLH History News* (summer 2000): 9.

<sup>17</sup> International Council of Museums, press release, 3 July 2001.



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contemporary interests. By elucidating their own programs, the coalitions encourage member sites to take advantage of public interest to openly engage visitors in a moral agenda.

Some understanding of the complexity of sites of uncomfortable history derives from the different words used to describe them. The phrases “sites of shame,” “sites of conscience,” and “*lieux de mémoire*,” each connote a different meaning. A site of shame or conscience seems to call for reflection upon shared accountability for an event, whereas *lieux de mémoire* suggests a shared responsibility for remembrance. This remembrance can be interpreted through the lenses of both official accounts of history and the collective memory of the public. At sites commemorating events that took place in the twentieth century, there are likely to be survivors who may participate in the site as visitors or advisors, contributing individual and collective memories to the interpretation of the site.

One of the central questions of this study is whether the ruins of three sites of uncomfortable history, Eastern State Penitentiary, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and Manzanar National Historic Site, evoke for visitors a past that still speaks to the present, and how that message is interpreted by site managers. These sites are not considered in the same light as sites of atrocities, such as European concentration camps, or other memorial sites that commemorate death. Rather, they are sites whose physical neglect reflects the marginalized nature of their former inhabitants and the lack of interest in commemorating the complex histories of the



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sites. Like most sites of memory, these three sites are interpreted through the lens of a contemporary moral message that seeks to alert the present to the shameful or less acknowledged aspects of a shared past.

The commemoration of victims and the promotion of humanitarian values lose their abstract quality when thousands of visitors begin to visit the sites, whether as part of a pilgrimage or as part of a vacation itinerary. Museums with a moral agenda seek to engage visitors with historical lessons that resonate in the present. But in evaluating the interpretive methods of “activist memorial museums” that commemorate violence and genocide, Edward Linenthal poses the question: “How can we assume these memorials lead to social engagement rather than a lust for vicarious immersion?”<sup>18</sup> The answer may lie in part in the interpretive methods sites use to present their “heritage” to the public.

The increasing demands tourism places on both celebratory and commemorative heritage sites leads to the increased commercialization of those sites, which in turn generates a demand for heritage-related souvenirs and theatrical programming. The commercialization of sites of uncomfortable history can have a negative impact on the integrity of the site. David Lowenthal notes that the domestication of horror as an interpretive display can “defang” the sobering lessons of history:

Heritage is also chided for hallowing the horrific and selling souvenirs of catastrophe and scenes of slaughter. The Kennedy death site is Dallas’s biggest tourist draw. Young visitors to Auschwitz glory in

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<sup>18</sup> Linenthal, “September 11<sup>th</sup> and After.”



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gore, prize Nazi insignia, and gloat over jackboots.... Heritage tourism touts locales of classic infamy: Paris sewers, Welsh coal mines, slave auctions, concentration camps.<sup>19</sup>

Emphasizing the negative consequences of turning sites such as these into tourist attractions, Lowenthal characterizes the public interest in these heritage sites as “historical self-flagellation.”<sup>20</sup> Yet there are two sides to the public interest in sites of uncomfortable history. Although tourism inevitably turns the sites into a form of entertainment for travelers, the interpretation of infamous sites also offers visitors the opportunity to reject official versions of past events that fail to take into account any view but that of dominant groups. The opening of these *lieux de mémoire* allows the sites to remain a part of the public consciousness, and allow the public to participate in a collective remembering. One difficulty in the interpretation of the sites, however, is that the sites may engage in a theatrical presentation that ultimately entertains rather than edifies.

Curators at most heritage sites are expected to create an interpretive exhibit, or experience, that encourages visitors to feel some connection to the events commemorated. In order to involve the visitors in complex lessons of the past, the sites must engage as well as inform. Sites of conscience in particular must maintain a delicate balance between the need to engage the visitor and the mandate of historical accuracy and site integrity. The interpretive tools of narrative and storytelling are deployed in varying degrees at the three sites discussed in this study. The attendant

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<sup>19</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 346.



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obligation of the sites to maintain equilibrium between interpretive methods and ethical standards, especially when a contemporary mission influences the interpretation of the site, will be analyzed in subsequent chapters.

The ethical standards applied to the interpretation of each site also extend to the curators' and visitors' assessments of the "authenticity" of each site. In reaction to the commercial cooptation of many heritage sites, some visitors demand a greater authenticity at historic sites. Dean MacCannell theorizes that tourists seek "real" experiences, but can never be certain if their experiences are in fact authentic.<sup>21</sup> If much of tourism today is motivated by a quest for authenticity, then tourism at decayed sites of conscience becomes a complicated experience of competing authenticities. The three sites of conscience evaluated in this study were each transformed from abandoned sites into heritage sites. What was rejected as part of America's cultural heritage was later deemed worthy of commemoration through curatorial intervention, altering the visitors' perceptions of the absence evoked by the decay. At Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site and Manzanar National Historic Site, the sites' dramatic states of decay dispel the notion that the visitor is gaining any understanding of prison life as it was actually lived at the sites. Similarly, the empty "ruins apartment" at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum presents an empty vessel: the room as it was after being abandoned in 1935, not during its occupancy by immigrants. Yet the decay of each of these three sites creates a different sense of authenticity: because the sites are presented

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<sup>21</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 91.



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as having been untouched since they were last inhabited or dismantled, they gain authenticity in that nothing is “staged” for the visitors. The obvious decay of the sites relieves the visitors’ uncertainties about authenticity.

Yet whereas the sites themselves may appear to be undisturbed in their decay, the visitor does not have an unmediated experience: preservationists and curators make choices about the presentation of the sites’ histories that focus on some aspects and obscure others. The curators may have fewer illusions about the accessibility of “authenticity,” and likely understand that every fact is mediated by its presenters and its observers. The professional standards of authenticity that have been established to assist in the preservation of site integrity, and the application of these standards to each of the three sites in this study, will be discussed within the context of each site in the chapters that follow.

Because the interpretation of each of the sites in this study relies, in part, on the visual impact of the deterioration of their built environment, each site will be evaluated in terms of the ways in which it gains or loses power from the presence of decay, and how frankly this is acknowledged in the interpretation of the site. The complex interpretation of decay at sites not previously considered part of the nation’s shared heritage relies in part on the changing cultural perceptions of decay, which are the subject of the next chapter.



## Chapter Three: The Interpretation of Ruins

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Historic sites that have been rejected as part of the nation's shared cultural heritage often receive commemoration only after a long period of abandonment; their deterioration during this period of "selective oblivion" adds another layer of meaning to the sites, since their decay serves as a symbol of rejection, absence, or loss. At sites of uncomfortable history in particular, this selective oblivion is reinforced by the need for distance between the past and the present that allows visitors to face and comprehend the commemorative value of the site. Some sites "remain in limbo before American society comes to terms with their meaning and a past marred by violence and tragedy."<sup>22</sup> The decayed states of the three sites examined in this study may serve as symbols of deliberate gaps in public memory. However, visitors' interpretations of the decay as symbolic or allegorical is shaped at each site by the degree of curatorial intervention, the type of narrative presented, and the acknowledgment of the decay as either a central or marginal component of the site and its history.

Even when not presented as a part of the site's interpretive program, images of decay and ruin at historic sites evoke varying and complex responses from visitors. Ruins as "allegories of transient times"<sup>23</sup> may provoke contemplation of the passage of time, distancing the viewer from the history of the site, or may encourage visitors to link the abandonment of the site to the marginalization of its former occupants.

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 208.



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Changing cultural and aesthetic perceptions of decay and individual sensibilities all influence visitors' reactions to ruined sites. This chapter will attempt a brief overview of the changing perceptions of ruins in Europe and the United States, and assess how this history shapes the current cultural interpretation of the three decayed sites that are the focus of this study.

Ruins have during different periods served as icons of romance, melancholy, nostalgia, and admonition. Visitors to ruins today may still experience "sensations of regret, of veneration, or compassion," emotions Thomas Whately suggested in 1770 were excited by the viewing of ruins.<sup>24</sup> Ruins may also symbolize memory and forgetting to those seeking lessons from the past. Florence Hetzler suggested that the experience of ruins offers the possibility of a sublime unity: the intersection of the ruined structure and landscape, the active forces of nature, and the viewer's perception.<sup>25</sup> Another element in an aesthetic of ruins is the absence inherent in the structure; the fragmentation that evokes the abandonment that necessarily anteceded nature's encroachment. At the end of the twentieth century, ruins of destruction like the battlefields, memorials, and bombed buildings of two world wars have left an imprint on the American imagination that inevitably conflicts with the romantic melancholy of the Picturesque tradition of ruins. More pervasive, the urban decay resulting from the abandonment of urban cores or the creation of industrial wastelands

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), quoted in W.E. Krumbein et al., *Durability and Change*, 230.

<sup>25</sup> Florence Hetzler, "The Aesthetics of Ruins: A New Category of Being," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 16, no. 2 (summer 1982): 105-108.



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similarly tempers the view of nature reclaiming the built environment. Ruins of sites of uncomfortable history may provoke contemplation, sorrow, or melancholy, rather than nostalgia. They bespeak the transience of memory as well as the transience of human endeavor and conflict.

The ruins of war have provoked reflection for centuries; as early as the second century B.C. poets elegized the ruins of defeated Corinth.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the appreciation of ruins that evolved after the Renaissance in Europe was linked less to concepts of war and defeat than to attitudes toward the historic past. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the apogee of their popularity, ruins were considered through both historical and aesthetic lenses: as documents of the classical architectural forms of the past and as evocative of an emotional or romantic mood.<sup>27</sup> In the eighteenth century, ruins took on moral significance as well, representing the transience of life and the vanity of human endeavors.<sup>28</sup> Decay as a metaphor for death and despair gained sway over the more romantic melancholia popularly evoked earlier. The changing attitudes toward ruins and decay were evident in art, landscape design, and literature. Despite the shifting symbolism of ruins, their power to inspire reflection remained an integral element of their meaning. Thomas Whately suggested, “At the sight of a ruin, reflections on the change, the decay, and the desolation before us,

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<sup>26</sup> Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Zucker, “Ruins—An Aesthetic Hybrid,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 120.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, eds., *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics Since 1770* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), 196.



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naturally occur...”<sup>29</sup> The popularity of Picturesque and Romantic conceptions of decay coincided with the advance of industrialism. Wojciech Lesnikowski theorized that the English appreciation of ruins stemmed from an escapist reaction to the increasing complexity and dissonance of a society shaped by the Industrial Revolution. Artists, travelers, and landscape designers used ruins as vehicles for philosophical and aesthetic ruminations that carried them beyond the swiftly changing and contradictory modern world.<sup>30</sup>

The societal transformation affecting urban and rural society also influenced changing conceptions of man’s relationship with nature, and the opposing powers of the manmade and the natural world. In Europe, popular interest in historic ruins during this period was accompanied by an interest in landscaped gardens with artificial ruins, which allowed aristocrats to meditate upon the transience of human endeavor and the triumph of nature in carefully cultivated gardens. Yet, artificial ruins also reflected a triumph over nature, since the landscapes “included a controlled expression of nature’s reclamation of the constructions of man.”<sup>31</sup>

Contemporaries in nineteenth-century America also placed ruins within the context of the triumph of and triumph over nature. Whereas the American sensibility at the time allowed for an appreciation of natural wonders, which served as evidence of the passage of geological time and the scope and greatness of the continent, the ruins of

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<sup>29</sup> Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening*, quoted in Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Wojciech Lesnikowski, “On Symbolism of Memories and Ruins,” *Reflections* 6 (spring 1989): 68-79.

<sup>31</sup> Michael S. Roth, Claire Lyons, and Charles Merewether, *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), 5.



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earlier civilizations contributed little to the growing nation's ideals of discovery and progress. Americans focusing on progress and westward expansion associated decay with the deterioration of things past. David Lowenthal suggested that nineteenth-century America's "devotion to recency" allowed little space for the representation of the past. He quoted a canal builder who expressed the American idyll of progress in 1825:

Did we live amidst ruins and...decay, we might be as little inclined as others to look forward. But we delight in the promised sunshine of the future, and leave to those who...have passed their grand climacteric to console themselves with the splendors of the past.<sup>32</sup>

Entranced by the myth of the frontier, Americans at the time were less likely to see ruins as romantic than as symbolic of decline and Old World moral decay.

By the mid-nineteenth century, debates over the treatment of ancient buildings escalated in Europe, and theories on the appeal of decay became intertwined with the issue of restoring buildings and monuments to an earlier state. As monuments of the classical and medieval past continued to decay, some believed restoring the buildings to their original condition was possible and necessary, while others considered the deterioration of buildings to be inevitable and natural. The debate crystallized into two opposing camps: the restorationists and the anti-restorationists. The most famous nineteenth-century restorationist was Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet le-Duc, who defined restoration as follows: "To restore an edifice means neither to maintain it, nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to reestablish it in a finished state, which may in fact never

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<sup>32</sup> Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, 189.



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have actually existed at any given time.”<sup>33</sup> Viollet-le-Duc sought to prescribe and proscribe which evidence of the past should remain visible, either through reconstruction or the removal of later additions or alterations. He sought to bridge the gap between the artists and builders of the past and the present, by denying the intervening passage of time.

Viollet le-Duc’s contemporary, John Ruskin, was vehemently opposed to the reconstruction of buildings. He believed that decay was the visible manifestation of the progression of time and nature, and that imposing a contemporary sensibility on icons of the past destroyed their integrity. He wrote in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*:

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word restoration understood. It means the most total destruction which buildings can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with fake description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is impossible, as impossible to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.<sup>34</sup>

During a period of vociferous debate between restorationists and anti-restorationists, Ruskin and William Morris led an Anti-Restoration movement. William Morris’s “Principles of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Building” encouraged the preservation, rather than reconstruction, of ancient monuments:

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<sup>33</sup> Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley, Jr., and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 314.

<sup>34</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849; reprint, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1956), 199.



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It is for these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, to raise another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one; in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.<sup>35</sup>

Although debates over reconstruction and restoration continue today, by the end of the nineteenth century, the word “restoration” was generally regarded in England as connoting destruction and falsification.<sup>36</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernism brought with it an anti-romantic view of decay and ruins. Alois Riegl, in his 1903 essay “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” acknowledged the viewer’s sensory reaction as an integral part of their experience of aging monuments. However, he posited that as the commemorative value of monuments gained cultural power in the twentieth century, ruins no longer evoked the “Baroque pathos” of the seventeenth century. Rather, they represented to the viewer the inevitability of natural law. Physically deteriorated structures, which render visible the passage of time, serve as “catalysts which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life cycle, of the emergence of the particular from the general and its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general.” According to Riegl’s theory of “age-value”:

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<sup>35</sup> Price, Talley, and Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 319.

<sup>36</sup> Stephan Tschudi Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 16-17.



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Just as monuments pass away according to the workings of natural law—and it is precisely for this reason that they provide aesthetic satisfaction to the modern viewer—so preservation should not aim at stasis but ought to permit the monuments to submit to incessant transformation and steady decay...The cult of age-value condemns not only every willful destruction of monuments as a desecration of all-consuming nature but in principle also every effort at conservation, as restoration is an equally unjustified interference with nature.<sup>37</sup>

Riegl contrasts the commemorative importance of age-value with that of historical value, which emphasizes the monument's status as an artifact that should be preserved. Historical value "singles out one moment in the developmental continuum of the past and places it before our eyes as if it belonged to the present." A third value defined by Riegl, intentional commemorative value, seeks to preserve the monument for future generations through restoration.

Riegl's theory of age-value and the work of nineteenth-century theorists who also rejected the restoration of monuments as an action incompatible with the natural evolution of the built environment were significant in the development of conservation theory in the twentieth century. In 1931, at the International Conference on Restoration in Athens, the first international conservation protocol emphasized the importance of acknowledging the passage of time and opposed the concealment of interventions and restorations. By 1957, Guglielmo De Angelis d'Ossat concluded:

Today, because of a complex mixture of cultural and spiritual influences, we approach monuments of every form and of any state of conservation, with respect, almost with humility; our generation avoids imposing its ideas upon these monuments, and more than anything, making additions or modifications which could lessen their essence,

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<sup>37</sup> Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," *Oppositions* 25 (1980): 32.



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because we know this would constitute a pretentious act of pride and ignorance.<sup>38</sup>

Cesare Brandi formulated a theory of restoration that emphasized the complexity of restoring structures: “Restoration is the methodological moment in which the work of art is appreciated in its material form and in its historical and aesthetic duality, with a view to transmitting it to the future.” His theory of the preservation of ruins emphasized simply preserving the status quo, since any other intervention would return the “ruin” to a unified building, thus undermining its status as a ruin.<sup>39</sup> The preservation of ruins today is primarily preoccupied with conserving the fragments as physical evidence of the historical past, however, conservators still debate varying approaches to preserving or restoring ruins. Caroline Stanford questioned whether modern-day preservationists are ultimately motivated to preserve ruins because of their value as cultural artifacts, or by an interest in freezing the passage of time. She argued that allowing the passage of time to continue to affect the ruins, which effects the sublime transformation of the viewer described by ruins watchers for centuries, is being replaced by a preoccupation with preserving the physical vestiges of the past.<sup>40</sup> The approach to preserving ruins influences the viewers’ interpretations of the ruins, whether they are presented as historical artifacts or as evocative mementos of a bygone era, or something in between.

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<sup>38</sup> Brigitte Desrochers, “Ruins Revisited: Modernist Conceptions of Heritage,” *The Journal of Architecture* 5, no. 1 (spring 2000): 42.

<sup>39</sup> Cesare Brandi, *Teoria del restauro*, quoted in Price, Talley, and Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 230, 233.

<sup>40</sup> Caroline Stanford, “On Preserving Our Ruins,” *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 6, no. 3 (November 2000): 28-29.



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In the twenty-first century, ruins are less likely to have the romantic connotations common in earlier eras. Rather, they may serve as reminders of despair, death, and the transience of human life. Yet ruins and decay still have the power to provoke reflection and effect the transformation of the viewer. Ruins created through abandonment and the subsequent invasion of nature are likely interpreted in a different way from those ruins created by destructive acts of war or natural disaster that leave a lingering historical memory.

The ruins created by the Second World War have exerted a tremendous influence on modern conceptions of the link between ruins of war and the preservation of collective memory. In London, as in some other European cities, ruins created during foreign bombing campaigns during the war have been allowed to remain standing because of their symbolic power for the collective memory of those events. Near the end of the war, the Dean of St. Paul's in London advocated that some of Britain's bombed churches remain in ruins, to be "regarded as permanent places of open-air worship, meditation and recreation, as national war memorials of this war and focal points of picturesque delight in the planned surroundings of the post-war world."<sup>41</sup> The incorporation of ruins as war memorials into an urban planning and landscaping scheme may seem to de-emphasize the ruined churches' power as *lieux de mémoires*, but the proposal's commitment of the ruined churches to multiple civic purposes may reflect the radical nature of recommending that this non-traditional war memorial serve as a place of reflection rather than as a celebration of heroes and

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<sup>41</sup> W.R. Matthews, "Save Us Our Ruins," *Architectural Review* 95 (January 1944): 13.



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battles. Similarly, in Japan in the post-war period, some modern architects incorporated the concept of ruins into their designs in order to acknowledge the devastation caused by atomic warfare.<sup>42</sup>

Some of the most dramatic commemorations of the Second World War are the decayed sites throughout Europe that are now Holocaust memorials. At concentration camps and train stations, sites of horrific atrocities deteriorated over time. At those sites that have not opened visitors centers with interpretive guides and programming, visitors walk unguided through sites whose decay evokes absence and loss. Author Svetlana Boym described the effect of such a site's decay in a passage worth quoting at length:

If you come to the Grunewald station and walk all the way to the last platform, you find the track covered with gravel and weeds and a few sickly birch trees growing through the rails. There are no trains here, only iron memorial plaques on the platform with dates and numbers. They tell you the number of Jews transported to the camps and the exact dates. The past is stored here in its unredeemable emptiness. It is, in the words of John Ashbery, a ‘return to the point of no return.’ This most striking kind of commemoration is not about building monuments but about leaving unfunctional spaces, beyond repair and renewal. The history here is not housed in a museum but open to the elements. In the Grunewald station the past is not present as a symbol but as another dimension of existence, as another landscape that haunts our everyday errands through the city. The gravel and weeds in the abandoned train tracks provide an antidote to restorative nostalgia. For me, this was the most powerful memorial to the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup>

The “unredeemable emptiness” of Holocaust sites such as this does not need narrative interpretation; it is the decayed landscape that evokes the irrevocability of the past.

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<sup>42</sup> Riichi Miyake, “The Afterimage of Ruins,” *Japan Architect* 359 (March 1987): 6-9.

<sup>43</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 194.



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The power of this site derives in part from the visitor's implicit knowledge of the events being commemorated. Yet it is possible that at historic sites that use decay to represent the unredeemable events of the past, decay may lose its narrative power as a symbol of admonition if visitors lack an implicit knowledge of the events commemorated. For those visitors, the ruins may represent picturesque melancholy more than an evocation of absence and collective memory and forgetting. At Auschwitz II-Birkenau, only the bombed ruins of the gas chambers, the gatehouse, and railway tracks remain at the isolated, marshy site. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, in their study of "dark tourism," noted that at the site "the opportunity to reflect without prescription or direction is offered. Clearly, there is an assumption or expectation from those who manage the site that visitors' conclusions can move in only one direction—but this is seldom, if ever, stated at the Auschwitz sites."<sup>44</sup>

Assumptions about the narrative power of decay are perhaps most strongly held at sites of atrocities and horror. But all sites of conscience that have decay as an element of the site must consider the effect of decay on visitors, and consider visitor expectations when planning the interpretive narratives of the site. Historians Michael H. Frisch and Dwight Pitcaithley assessed the visitor reaction to Ellis Island through this lens of implied narrative, and their assessment is relevant to the three historic sites discussed in this study. Ellis Island, which processed immigrants and deportees from 1892 until 1954, was abandoned for decades before the National Park Service reopened

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<sup>44</sup> John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Continuum, 2000), 25.



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the former immigration center as a historic site in 1976. The intervening years were a period of neglect and deterioration. Frisch and Pitcaithley visited the site before the restoration of the immigration building, assessing the degree to which a group touring the site brought to the famous landmark a pre-existing framework of understanding. The historians analyzed the tension between an audience invested in one particular narrative of the site and the interpreter's mandate to present an inclusive history. Visitors were led on guided tours of some of the derelict buildings on the island, described by the authors as ruins:

Essentially, Ellis in this 1976-84 period was an unrestored ruin, encountered in a virtually abandoned state, with rubble on all sides, weeds growing through the floors, sunlight or rain pouring in the roof in places, abandoned equipment and random pieces of furniture strewn about. Little has changed. There are no exhibits, labels, text, or other indications of the history-viewing present; the sense is that one is looking at a site that has not much been touched since occupants departed and operations ceased many years ago, leaving a sort of institutional ghost town through which visitors are permitted to wander in silence.<sup>45</sup>

Because there was no interpretive programming on the site during this period, the visitors were guided only by the interpretive dialogue of the tour guide, who led the group through a story of immigrants being processed at the immigration center. The interpretive tools evident during the historic tour were “the narrator’s description of anecdotal experience, the ghostly image of the now-empty spaces, and the audience’s imagination.” Some visitors found this formulation of the tour so evocative that they

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<sup>45</sup> Michael H. Frisch and Dwight Pitcaithley, “Audience Expectations as Resource and Challenge: Ellis Island as Case Study,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 161.



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regretted that the restoration of the buildings would preclude future opportunities to tour the site as a ruin. Frisch and Pitcaithley noted that the simplification of Ellis Island's complex history eliminated mention of those elements that did not fit comfortably within most visitors' preconceived ideas of the story of the site. The guide focused on the immigrant experience, and did not mention the site's subsequent use as a detention center for deportees during the Red Scare. The guide's interpretation relied upon the assumption that the audience possessed a certain body of knowledge, and expanded imaginatively upon, but did not challenge, this pre-existing framework.<sup>46</sup>

Visitors to Ellis Island during its period of ruin, like visitors to all decayed sites of complicated and contentious history, bring with them their own knowledge of the past. Their visceral or intellectual reaction to the decay of the site is shaped by this pre-existing conception of the place as well as by the narrative power of the silent ruins. At the three sites that are the subject of this study, the state of ruin may help or hinder the visitors' ability to imagine the events that took place and the people who inhabited the sites. Some of the sites have been partially restored in order to more effectively communicate the historical narrative. Each site's negotiation of the balance between allowing the decay to serve as an element of theatre in the interpretation of the site and the programmatic need to facilitate visitor understanding through the re-creation of certain aspects of the past will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

The three sites examined in this study were neglected through absence; they were not built as memorials, and were never intended to serve as reminders of the past.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 153-165.



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Recent interventions, including the selective absence of intervention, have created their commemorative power as part of a shared cultural heritage. The transformative power of ruins, so important to the romantic sensibility of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has been translated in these sites into a different kind of transformation. These sites may encourage reflection on the transience of life and human effort, just as ruins inspired in the past. But these ruins may also invite the visitor to reflect further on the gap between the past and the present, and on the period of abandonment during which the sites and the people who inhabited them were not commemorated. Edward Linenthal's ideal of the "civic transformation" of visitors to memorial sites could be effected by the powerful intersection of the reflection sparked by ruins and the collective memories and implied narratives visitors bring to the sites. Whether the ruins become vehicles for bringing the past into the present, or ultimately disengage the visitor from the history presented at the sites, and how the visitors' perceptions of the authenticity of the sites is influenced by the state of decay are questions that will be addressed in the next three chapters, which focus on the commemorative value of decay at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and Manzanar National Historic Site.



## **Chapter Four: Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site**

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The fortress-like walls of Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, once a nineteenth-century symbol of authority, now contain the crumbling remains of a complex of nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings in the process of ruin. The prison was built in 1829 to isolate criminals; today, it is open to the public, and the alienation, solitude, and confinement experienced by prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary from 1829 to 1971 are interpreted through multiple media. The managers of the historic site encourage visitors to link the past to present-day issues, and examine prison reform through a historical lens, through historical exhibits and site-specific art installations that bring contemporary issues into the prison. The Board of Directors of Eastern State Penitentiary stated the site's mission as follows:

Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc. works to preserve and restore the architecture of Eastern State Penitentiary; to make the Penitentiary accessible to the public; to explain and interpret its complex history; to place current issues of corrections and justice in an historical framework; and to provide a public forum where these issues are discussed. While the interpretive program advocates no specific position on the state of the American justice system, the program is built on the belief that the problems facing Eastern State Penitentiary's architects have not yet been solved, and that the issues these early prison reformers addressed remain of central importance to our nation.

Making the site a locus of reform is in keeping with the site's historic origins. Built in 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary was a radical experiment in the reformation of eighteenth-century penal systems. In 1787, Quakers created the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (now called the Pennsylvania Prison Society—which initially collaborated with the historic site managers on programming).



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These philanthropists sought to replace the prison system in use at the Walnut Street Prison, which housed criminals together regardless of the nature of their crime, with a system of solitary confinement accompanied by labor and moral and secular instruction. After several years of debate, authorizing legislation for the creation of Eastern State Penitentiary passed on March 20, 1821.<sup>47</sup>

Architect John Haviland (1792-1852) was commissioned to create an innovative interior design suitable for the Quakers' reformist ideals. Eastern State Penitentiary's Building Commissioners stated the desired effect of the prison design:

Good design is to produce, by means of sufferings principally acting on the mind and accompanied with moral and religious instruction, a disposition to virtuous conduct, the only sure preventive of crime; and where this beneficial effect does not follow, to impress so great a dread and terror, as to deter the offender from the commission of crime in the state where the system of solitary confinement exists.<sup>48</sup>

Haviland's plan of seven cellblock wings radiating from a central rotunda and observation tower allowed for the surveillance of guards as well as prisoners (see Figure 1). His design of individual cells with adjacent enclosed exercise yards ensured that prisoners made no visual or auditory contact with each other. The first three cellblocks constructed had no doors connecting the cells to the corridors; instead a small opening was made in the wall, through which guards passed food and work supplies. Prisoners entered their cells through the doors that led to the exercise yards.

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<sup>47</sup> This chapter's discussion of the early history of Eastern State Penitentiary draws extensively on Norman Johnston, Kenneth Finkel and Jeffrey A. Cohen's excellent and exhaustive history of Eastern State Penitentiary: *Crucible of Good Intentions* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> *Letter, Report and Documents, on the Penal Code, from the President and Commissioners Appointed to Superintend the Erection of the Eastern Penitentiary, Adapted and Modeled to the System of Solitary Confinement* (Harrisburg, PA: S.C. Stambaugh, 1828), 13, quoted in: Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 32.



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Although this awkward system was later altered to allow for entry from the corridor, and subsequent cellblocks were built with doors to the corridor as well as the exercise yard, the original design conveys the stark isolation the prison was designed to enforce. Skylights, called the “eyes of God” by some guards, lit the cells from above, while an innovative plumbing and heating system was connected to each cell.<sup>49</sup> In subsequent years, as the prison population grew, several cellblocks and outbuildings were added to the prison complex.

While the radical Quaker reform agenda was reflected in Haviland’s innovative interior design, the castellated Gothic exterior of Eastern State Penitentiary was typical of contemporary British prisons, employing fortress-like towers and thick, thirty-foot high walls to create an imposing façade that conveyed authority to citizens outside its walls as well as to the prisoners within. The Building Commissioners of Eastern State Penitentiary noted:

The exterior of a solitary prison should exhibit as much as possible great strength and convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being who enters within its walls.<sup>50</sup>

Within the prison, the inmates were required to follow strictly enforced rules, which included cleanliness, silence, industriousness, and the mandatory observation of the Sabbath.<sup>51</sup> The prisoners were encouraged to look within themselves; their isolation was not intended to be a passive confinement, but rather a deprivation that led

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<sup>49</sup> Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Norman Johnston, *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 85; Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Vaux, *Brief Sketch of the Origin and History of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: McLaughlin Brothers, Printers, 1872), 100.



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to religious and civic transformation and transcendence. Whenever led to or from their cells, prisoners wore hoods to ensure they made no visual contact with either captors or other captives and did not gain any familiarity with the layout of the prison. In order to maintain complete silence in the wards and detect any efforts at communication between the prisoners, guards wore socks over their shoes and muffled the wheels of the food carts.<sup>52</sup>

Labor was mandatory at Eastern State; prisoners worked at shoemaking and other crafts within the solitude of their cells. Any inmate who refused to work faced punishment or the deprivation of privileges. Although Eastern State did not use corporal punishment, the use of restraint was accepted as part of the exertion of control over prisoners who violated the prison rules. The iron gag, a device that restrained a prisoner's hands and legs by an iron chain connected to an iron bar placed in the mouth, killed one inmate at Eastern State in the early nineteenth century. The restraining chair and straightjacket operated on the same principles: by confining movement and using restrictive and uncomfortable coercion, the inmate would avoid future punishment by not repeating the infraction. Although these restraints were not considered by prison administrators to be corporal punishment, their use ended after an 1834 investigation publicized the abuse.<sup>53</sup>

The prison's imposing design and controversial system of confinement drew thousands of tourists, emissaries from foreign countries, and scholars who visited

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<sup>52</sup> Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-64.



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Eastern State Penitentiary to compare the Pennsylvania system of solitary confinement with its philosophical competitor: the Auburn system, which differed from the former in allowing communal meals and labor and the use of corporal punishment. To some visitors, Eastern State represented a radical reform effort; to others it was a cruel experiment. Despite Eastern State Penitentiary's promise as a system of rehabilitation and redemption, the institution was criticized for the punitive nature of its complete isolation of prisoners. Although Eastern State Penitentiary's system was controversial from its inception, its design was adopted by prison planners in the United States and abroad, making Eastern State Penitentiary the "most widely copied prison in history."<sup>54</sup>

Built in response to a movement to reform the existing incarceration system in Philadelphia, Eastern State Penitentiary became obsolete when those conceptions changed again. By 1900, the increased population of prison inmates made separate confinement in Eastern State a logistical impossibility, undermining the mission of the prison's Quaker founders. By the 1930s, the penitentiary "was no longer a monument to the promise of rehabilitation. It had become a fatalistic part of the correctional bureaucracy, a warehouse for the state's toughest convicts. Little of the founders' optimism about human nature or the philanthropic tenor of its original governance survived."<sup>55</sup>

Considered by many to be a failed experiment, the prison closed in 1971. With no systematic maintenance, the site deteriorated rapidly. Decaying and collapsed roofs

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<sup>54</sup> Norman Johnston, "John Haviland, Jailer to the World," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 23, no. 2 (May 1964): 101.

<sup>55</sup> Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 81-82.



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contributed to the collapse of some exterior cell walls. Trees grew into some cells and the former exercise yards, and interior plaster walls crumbled (see Figure 2). The thirty-foot high walls protected the buildings from trespassers, but not from the encroachment of nature.

Although the site was not maintained during this period of abandonment, the historic significance of the site was not in question. As early as 1942, three prominent criminologists asserted:

In penological history, the Eastern Penitentiary is as important as Independence Hall in our political history. But it is high time to recognize that its value and virtues are, today, exclusively historic.... Part of the present Eastern Penitentiary, especially a couple of the best preserved of the original wings or cell blocks, could well be retained as a national penological museum.<sup>56</sup>

The site was designated a historic site by the City of Philadelphia in 1958, was added to the Register of National Historic Landmarks in 1965, and was placed on the State Register of Historic Places in 1970.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the local, state, and federal recognition of the site's significance, the feasibility of its preservation was uncertain. In 1977, the City of Philadelphia took title to the prison, and by 1984 transferred the property to the Redevelopment Authority to solicit adaptive use proposals for residential and commercial use. All the redevelopment plans submitted proposed demolishing most of the site, or making

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<sup>56</sup> Harry Elmer Barnes, Negley K. Teeters, and A.G. Fraser, *Report on Penal and Correctional Institutions and Correctional Policy in the State of Pennsylvania* (State College: Pennsylvania State College, 1944), 10, quoted in Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, *Crucible of Good Intentions*, 94.

<sup>57</sup> Julie Courtney and Todd Gilens, *Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/ The Prison as Subject* (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art and Design, 1995), 19.



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radical alterations to the buildings to accommodate new construction. However, the prison's historic status and its advanced decay contributed to the perception that a commercial adaptive use would not be feasible. In response to the threatened demolition of some of the site, local residents, planners, and historians created the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force, which advocated an approach sensitive to the preservation of the site, and sought to open the site to the public.<sup>58</sup> Today, despite the absence of heat, running water, or electricity, the site is open to visitors who explore the decayed hallways, take historic tours, view historical exhibits and art installations, or experience "Terror Behind the Walls," an annual haunted prison tour that has become the prison's primary source of operating revenue.

The contemporary use of Eastern State Penitentiary for historic tours, art exhibits, and the annual Halloween tour has transformed the prison into a stage for various spectacles. Because the site has been irrevocably altered by decay, the twenty-first century audience perceives the architectural spaces in a different way from the nineteenth-century tourists or prison administrators who once stood in their place. Nineteenth-century visitors may have sought to satisfy their curiosity by crossing the boundaries of the site's high walls, knowing they were free to leave at will. Today, visitors' perceptions of the echoing, unoccupied radial wings and cells are mediated by the incorporation of art, theatre, and historical analysis into those spaces.

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<sup>58</sup> Milton Marks, "Eastern State Penitentiary: Community vs. Preservation," *Historic Preservation Forum* 7, no. 5 (1993): 50-52.



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The decayed site blurs together the different eras of incarceration, and in an unmediated visit to the prison, the decay itself becomes the primary point of interest. Executive Director Sally Elk noted that the decay is relevant to the interpretation of the site in that the decay “points to the notion that ideas once embraced as noble can then be abandoned.”<sup>59</sup> However, the prison’s decay can evoke the abandonment of ideals, the failure of reforms, and the marginalization of the people who were the subject of this “holy experiment” only through interpretation, since most visitors do not bring with them an awareness of this implied narrative. Before gaining an understanding of the prison’s historical context, most tourists are drawn to the site because of its deteriorating state and its image as abandoned and haunted. The romantic decay of the prison is encapsulated in the language of the historic site’s promotional brochure: “Behind the massive, castle-like walls of an abandoned prison in Philadelphia, stands a lost world of crumbling cellblocks and empty guard towers.” The characterization of the prison as a lost world reinforces visitors’ conceptions of the site as a romantic ruin, as does the evocation of the site as “castle-like.” Perceptions of the prison as a forbidding landscape of authority are tempered by its abandoned state, although the effect of the architecture on passers-by may have changed little since George W. Smith’s 1833 observation:

The design and execution impart a grave, severe, and awful character to the external aspect of this building. The effect which it produces on the imagination of every passing spectator, is peculiarly impressive, solemn, and instructive.... This Penitentiary is the only edifice in this country

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<sup>59</sup> Sally Elk, Executive Director, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, interview by author, 29 January 2002.



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which is calculated to convey to our citizens the external appearance of those magnificent and picturesque castles of the middle ages, which contribute so eminently to embellish the scenery of Europe.<sup>60</sup>

The nineteenth-century conception of ruins posited an encounter with a ruin as a solitary experience that prompted reflection on the transience of life and the inevitable reclamation by nature of all things created by humans. Today, the ruins of Eastern State Penitentiary offer to some visitors a visual experience that provokes reflection. Contemporary artist Eileen Neff contemplates the “hard facts and strange beauty” evoked by the ruined prison:

Ailanthus and paulownia trees have made their way through the weakened walls as if to reclaim what was always theirs.... We feel, in the presence of this site, how the wild advance of nature moves us, draws its destruction and regeneration to an aesthetic height and reveals, as an artist would, some inexorable truth.<sup>61</sup>

Just as artists in the nineteenth century were inspired by images of ruins, so today Eastern State Penitentiary’s contrasting decay and regeneration and evocation of absence and isolation have inspired artists to create site-specific art installations that explore the prison as a setting within which to explore the past and present of the site. In the 1995 exhibit “Prison Sentences,” artists used Eastern State Penitentiary as the setting for diverse installations that “challenge the conventions of historical presentation and analysis” and ask how objects and places are imbued with history. The contemporary mission of the historic site was reflected in many of the exhibits,

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<sup>60</sup> George Washington Smith, *A Defense of the System of Solitary Confinement of Prisoners* (Philadelphia, 1833), 21, quoted in Negley Teeters, *They Were in Prison: A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1787-1937* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1937), 179.

<sup>61</sup> Courtney and Gilens, *Prison Sentences*, 22.



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which explored concepts of alienation, solitude, and confinement. Art critic Lucy Lippard noted that art in the context of the prison “can reflect on the social meaning of constriction, freedom, violence, and claustrophobia.”<sup>62</sup> The crumbling cells, some with bed frames and benches still in place, bespeak a terrible isolation and sensory deprivation.

Many artists have used the cell skylights as an evocative focal point. As symbols of hope, sources of “divine light,” and a reminder of the passage of time and the constraints on an inmate’s freedom, the skylights remain an evocative icon amidst the crumbling cells. In his 2000 exhibit “Daylights,” artist Richard Torchia installed *camera obscuras* in the skylights of cells in Cellblock Two. Torchia’s exhibit recalls the past for the visitor, since the projections of the *camera obscuras* evoke the absent prisoners evoked as both subjects and objects. While the decayed state of the cells calls attention to the time that has passed since the cells were occupied, the reliance of Torchia’s exhibit on the cycles of sunlight passing through the *camera obscuras* at different angles evokes the repetitive cycle of days passed within confinement.

Visitors view the images projected by the *camera obscuras* on cell walls and floors as if viewing individual works of art framed by the cell door. The art installation thus places the absent prisoners on the stage, with the art-viewer as the audience. Yet the projection of images from outside, such as the sky, passing clouds, or trees in the prison yard, into the cell also allows visitors to imagine a prisoner’s perspective. Torchia’s installation allows the visitor to gaze into the cell upon a silent, decayed

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4, 19.



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*tableau* of the present while simultaneously imagining the outward gaze of the absent prisoner. This experience is especially felt in those cells in which the visitor is required to step inside the cell in order to see the projection on the entry wall. Torchia evokes the gaze of authority in the cell exhibit entitled “(Watching) The Watchtower.” In this cell, the *camera obscura* projects an image of the guard-tower onto the vaulted ceiling of the cell. As the title suggests, the visitor, occupying the space of the inmate, watches the watchtower, the image of which evokes the gaze of the watching guards, who are no longer present. The artist described the installation as an experience that complicates the senses:

Images of the sunlit world seen in the *camera obscura* are characterized by a paradoxical detachment and vitality. These spectral pictures unravel the associative fabric of the senses. The sight of waving foliage, for example, is experienced without the accompanying touch or the sound of the wind. The projections may also elicit a sense of innocent expectation—a hypothetical antidote to the ‘hell of anticipation’ associated with incarceration. By giving the appearance that what is being depicted has physically entered the cells, the simplistic prison dynamic of ‘inside/outside’ is rendered more complex, more subjective.<sup>63</sup>

Whereas Richard Torchia called attention to the associative disjunction that occurs when viewing images absent any accompanying sound, the art exhibit installed in an adjacent cellblock broke the stillness of the prison with sound recordings and laser images. Artist Ilan Sandler, in his 2001 multi-media work “Arrest,” explored the impact of the unsolved murder of his sister upon his family. One cell was filled with sounds recorded at the site where her body was found: the dull hum of traffic, an

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<sup>63</sup> Richard Torchia, “Daylights: Camera Obscura Projections and Other Interventions at Eastern State Penitentiary” (2001).



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occasional bird. In the next cell, the voices of his parents talking about his sister emerged from the dark room. Sandler's art installation brought inside the walls of the prison the victims of crime, people who have an enduring and unseen connection to the criminal convicts who changed their lives. In this exhibit, the prison setting evoked the isolation and solitude of people outside the prison walls, who were represented only by disembodied voices and the evocation of absence and loss.

Artists Ilan Sandler and Richard Torchia explored concepts of alienation, violence, and solitude, using Eastern State Penitentiary as both a setting and as a component of their artwork. Lucy Lippard noted: "Artists can raise historical specters, reinstate and criticize reality, and educate through visual seduction a public that would not sit still for a history lesson."<sup>64</sup> While the visual stimulation of the art exhibits may make history lessons more palatable, the site is also developing an auditory interpretive tool that will be incorporated into the prison's historic tours. Beginning in 2003, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site will offer audio tours, based on the award-winning audio tour in use at Alcatraz, that use the voices of former inmates and staff to allow visitors to imagine the site as it was when fully occupied by thousands of inmates and guards. Although the audio tours will break the quiet that evokes the enforced silence and isolation of the prison's early years, they will likely allow visitors a better understanding of the history of the site by collapsing the time and distance between the listener and the former inhabitants of the site.

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<sup>64</sup> Courtney and Gilens, *Prison Sentences*, 17.



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The extensive interpretive program currently in place at the site seeks to close the distance between the past and the present by placing current issues within the context of historic events. The prison museum exhibits a collection of found and donated objects, including photographs, weapons fashioned by prisoners, and personal items. Curators display the artifacts in order to “bridge the gap between the empty prison and the social history that led to its construction and guided its operation.”<sup>65</sup> Recent historic exhibits include “ALONE: Use of Solitary Confinement in American Prisons, 1790 to Present,” an exhibit that explored the similarities between nineteenth-century isolation prisons and modern “Super-max” prisons. An exhibit entitled “Strangers in Our Midst: Race, Ethnicity and Incarceration” examined attitudes toward different ethnic groups as immigration trends changed the composition of Eastern State Penitentiary, and analyzed the diverse ethnic and racial populations in prisons in the 1990s.

Whereas contemplative and provocative art and historical exhibits play a significant role in fulfilling the site’s mission, the site also offers ahistorical interpretive programs that take advantage of the abandoned prison’s imposing Gothic façade and decay. The annual haunted prison tour, “Terror Behind the Walls,” takes advantage of the eeriness of the site’s image as a nineteenth-century Gothic ruin, but unlike the historic tours and art installations, the theatrical staging of a “haunted prison” is motivated primarily by financial considerations. Begun on a small scale in 1995, the tour grew when its financial potential became obvious. It is now the site’s

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<sup>65</sup> Elk, interview.



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largest fundraiser, and revenues allowed the site to increase its staff from one to three full-time employees.<sup>66</sup>

The terrors experienced by visitors to “Terror Behind the Walls” are not evoked by the imagined lives of former inmates, rather the spectacle exploits the sense of transgression visitors feel when entering the walls of the prison. The tour exploits the decay and an exaggerated version of the prison’s history in order to elicit fear. Its organizers turn the prison into a dark stage set, taking advantage of the spookiness of the darkness and decay of the massive spaces. The Halloween tour is not intended to present a picture of historical reality; rather it uses spectacle and staged theatre to increase attendance at the site.

The haunted prison involves costumed actors portraying gory ghosts of dead inmates and guards. The introduction to the “haunted” prison mimics a prisoner’s orientation, which is followed by the visitors being pushed through narrow hallways, sometimes simply walking through cellblocks, at other times walking through spaces constructed within the prison. One such space is the “Insane Asylum,” a dark gallery in which temporary walls make navigation through the hall difficult. Interpretive staff dressed as ghosts of prisoners act “insane” and accost and threaten visitors. Although the presence of mentally ill prisoners is a part of the history of Eastern State Penitentiary, the Halloween tour fabricates a myth of insane criminals that has more to do with contemporary horror films than the history of the prison that serves as the spectacle’s setting. In the nineteenth century, before overpopulation led to the sharing

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



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of cells, critics accused that the prison's system of solitary confinement caused mental instability in some prisoners. Disputing the idea that isolation led to insanity, prison administrators usually claimed that any prisoners who exhibited symptoms of insanity had already been suffering from mental illness before admission.<sup>67</sup>

After walking through the "Insane Asylum," visitors encounter a platform holding a legless, armless, eviscerated man who engages the crowd waiting for admission to the next gallery. This "medical experiment" gone awry is an exaggeration for dramatic effect of the fact that prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary were paid small sums of money to voluntarily participate in medical experiments. The prisoners were often oblivious to the nature and consequences of the experiments, and were sometimes enlisted to help administer the experiments as well.<sup>68</sup> However, the gruesome victim of experimentation that greets visitors at this stage of the Halloween tour is more a standard haunted house character than a symbol of the abuse of prisoners.

The organizers of the Halloween tour take measures to ensure that this use of the prison site for entertainment and fundraising does not affect the integrity of the site's physical fabric. Executive Director Sally Elk stated:

Neither the high flow of traffic nor the theartic installation affects the historic fabric of the building. The Halloween installations are not attached to the building. As far as the route, people walk on the stone

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<sup>67</sup> Teeters, *They Were in Prison*, 246.

<sup>68</sup> See generally, Alan Hornblum, *Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison: A Story of Abuse and Exploitation in the Name of Medical Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998).



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floors of the prison cellblocks, or on plywood floors build for the tours.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the tour does not conflict with the Code of Ethics of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, which focuses on the preservation of physical fabric rather than attempting to codify historic integrity or authenticity.<sup>70</sup> Although the use of Eastern State Penitentiary for this type of spectacle does not cause significant damage to historic fabric, it does undermine the public's understanding of the history of the prison, and may encourage visitors to the Halloween tour to focus on exaggerated myths of the criminally insane predator, shocking medical experiments, and sadistic guards, that have some basis in truth but are grossly exaggerated.

Similarly, there is no assertion of authenticity in the annual Bastille Day event sponsored by Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site. The Bastille Day street festival features French food and people dressed as French revolutionaries who storm the front gate of the prison carrying muskets and singing "La Marseillaise," while a woman dressed as Marie Antoinette throws packaged cakes to the crowd.<sup>71</sup> Recently, however, the site has begun to scale back on the Bastille Day celebrations since the Halloween tour consumes significant resources and staff time.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Elk, interview.

<sup>70</sup> See The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, *Directory: The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works 1997* (Washington, DC: 1997), 24-31.

<sup>71</sup> Judith H. Dobrzynski, "For a Summer Getaway, a Model Prison," *New York Times*, 11 July 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Elk, interview.



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Visitors to Terror Behind the Walls and the Bastille Day event seek neither an authentic experience nor a history lesson; they seek to be entertained. The museum's administrators do not claim that the purpose of these tours is to provoke thoughtful reflection on the role of prisons in society; rather, the Halloween tour raises funds that are used toward overhead and the creation of the historical exhibits and art installations.

The question of how to achieve a balance between education and entertainment is being negotiated at sites similar to Eastern State Penitentiary as prison sites become increasingly popular tourist attractions. Infamous nineteenth-century penal colonies and prisons like Alcatraz, Devil's Island in French Guiana, and Robben Island near Cape Town, all abandoned, are now open to the public. Historians Tunbridge and Ashworth note that the interpretation of these prisons as historic sites is only possible because they are no longer viewed as part of the present, or through the lens of human suffering:

...the passing of time may remove much of the horror, leaving only a compelling story from a distant past to be related as entertainment.... The elapse of time may not only soften the events themselves but alter the responses of visitors who are no longer personally involved in the events being viewed....<sup>73</sup>

Linking the past to the present at sites such as these is particularly challenging. Although prisoners were still housed at Eastern State Penitentiary as recently as 1971, the crumbling nineteenth-century architecture of the buildings evokes an earlier era and perhaps distances the viewer from a sense of connection to recent history.

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<sup>73</sup> Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 114-115.



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Nonetheless, the use of historic exhibits and art installations do much to link the history of the prison to contemporary issues, fulfilling the historic site's mission to provide a public forum for civic dialogue on issues of corrections and justice. While the decay of the echoing cellblocks contributes to the theatrical interpretation of the space, the solitude and silence of the abandoned prison also create a contemplative space that likely evokes for visitors some insight into imprisonment past and present.



Historian Carl Becker said, “The actual past is gone; and the world of history is an intangible world, recreated imaginatively... The event itself, the facts, do not say anything, do not impose any meaning. It is the historian who speaks, who imposes a meaning.”<sup>74</sup> At the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, historians, curators, and tour guides imaginatively recreate the daily life of nineteenth- and twentieth-century tenement dwellers. Although the recreation is largely fictitious, it is based on historical sources and serves the purpose of bringing the past to life in order to help visitors connect the past to the present.

Focusing on social and economic issues that continue to affect immigrants today, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is one of the few historic sites in the United States where the concept for the museum predated the determination of the built site where that concept would be implemented. The museum’s founder and president, Ruth Abram, sought to establish a museum that would tell the untold stories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants, “urban pioneers,” in a Lower East Side tenement house that represented the “urban log cabin.” Abram’s efforts reflected a desire to implement both a historic and a contemporary mission by bringing museum visitors into contact with an important part of their nation’s past and present:

I hoped that through this confrontation with revered ancestors, Americans could be moved to participate in a national conversation on similarly situated contemporary immigrants. I further hoped that Americans might realize that those strangers have more in common than not with the forebears they admire. For those newly arrived, I hoped to

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<sup>74</sup> Carl Becker, quoted in Michael A. Tomlan, ed., *Preservation of What, For Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance* (Ithaca: The National Council for Preservation Education, 1997), 89.



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offer the comfort which comes from the knowledge that as immigrants they are part of a vital American tradition.<sup>75</sup>

Ruth Abram intended the new museum to stand as a “vibrant beacon for tolerance.”<sup>76</sup> In 1985, Abram and curator Anita Jacobson began to search for a suitable tenement to house the museum. Their hunt ended in 1988, when the storefront at 97 Orchard Street on Manhattan’s Lower East Side became available for rent. The tenement building had twenty apartments, all vacated in 1935 when stricter housing codes prompted the landlord to evict tenants and close the residential portion of the building. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum moved into the building’s storefront in March 1988, and opened a few months later to begin serving its mission of “honoring the trials and triumphs of poor and unheralded families.”<sup>77</sup> In 1992, 97 Orchard Street was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1998, the museum was designated an “affiliated area” of the National Park Service, linking it to other local sites commemorating immigration, including Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.<sup>78</sup> Today, the building is a National Historic Landmark, visited by more than 90,000 visitors each year.

At the time of its founding, the museum intended to use fictional narratives and object-based exhibits to illustrate the tenement experience. However, the museum ultimately decided to present the stories of the former inhabitants of 97 Orchard Street

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<sup>75</sup> Abram, “Planting Cut Flowers,” 6.

<sup>76</sup> Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story: The History of 97 Orchard Street and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum* (New York: Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 1999), 9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 18.



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rather than a composite of tenement dwellers. Museum researchers used census material, court and voter records, oral histories, and archaeological research to learn about the lives of former residents. Research revealed that nearly 7,000 people from more than twenty countries lived at 97 Orchard Street between 1863 and 1935.<sup>79</sup> In order to give a broad overview of the historical patterns of the neighborhood, the museum chose to tell stories through period room installations that illustrated the lives of tenants with diverse religions and national origins who had lived in the building during different periods of its history.<sup>80</sup> Curator Steve Long noted the importance of the museum's diachronic presentation of the building's history:

When we were first getting started there was a lot of concern about not restoring the building all to a particular moment. Because what's so amazing about this as a preservation project is the building is all about change. The family groups who lived in the building changed, and the law changed, leading to forced alterations in the structure of the building and how it was used. If we had just picked 1863 and restored the building to the date when its doors opened, we would have missed out on all that change.<sup>81</sup>

The building's physical structure reflects the evolution of the New York City housing code. The Tenement House Act of 1901 mandated increased ventilation, light, and plumbing facilities in hallways and apartments. Alterations in 97 Orchard Street included the opening of an airshaft, the addition of two toilets in the halls on each floor, and interior windows to allow light into back rooms in each apartment. The 1929 Multiple Dwellings Law required additional upgrades in tenement buildings.

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<sup>79</sup> Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story*, 9, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Abram, "Planting Cut Flowers," 6.

<sup>81</sup> Steve Long, Curator, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, interview by author, 27 February 2002.



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including improved ventilation, fire-proofing, and additional toilets, that were too costly for many landlords, who evicted their tenants and closed their buildings. As a consequence of the landlord's inability or unwillingness to comply with the new law, 97 Orchard Street was closed in 1935.<sup>82</sup>

In 1993, in preparation for the re-creation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tenement apartments in the building, site managers stabilized the first floor; the second floor was stabilized in 1997. The site managers planned to leave two apartments in a state of ruin, and restore two apartments on each floor. They decided to leave the entry hall and the hallways on each floor largely as found, since there was insufficient physical evidence of the original fabric and no clear period of significance to direct the restoration.<sup>83</sup> Although the halls were not restored, one of the two decorative wall paintings in the entry hall was cleaned, while the other was left obscured by layers of soot and dust. The contrast between the two paintings allows visitors to glimpse the transformation over time of decorative detail added to the building after the installation of gas lighting at the turn of the century.

Currently, the first floor features the recreated apartment of the Gumpertz family, immigrants from Germany, as it may have appeared in 1878. Other apartments include the Rogarshevsky family, Eastern European Jews who moved into the building in 1910; the Confinos, Sephardic Jews from Turkey who lived in the building between 1913 and 1916; and the Baldizzi family from Sicily, who lived in the tenement from

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<sup>82</sup> Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story*, 36-37, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Steve Long, Curator, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, conversation with author, 28 June 2001.



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the late 1920s until 1935 when the building closed. The most recently recreated apartment represents the home of the Levine family, who lived in the building at the turn of the twentieth century and operated a garment factory in their home.

The curators of the museum set aside one apartment, which they labeled the “ruins apartment,” as a self-consciously uninterpreted space (see Figure 3). Because the building fell into a neglected state while it was still inhabited, some parts of 97 Orchard Street began the process of ruin even while the building was still occupied. However, the “ruins apartment” does not represent conditions as tenants experienced them. Rather, the apartment serves as a negative space, an empty stage that allows docents to show visitors what the apartments in the building looked like before they were restored by the museum. In the ruins apartment, visitors encounter the building in the same way it was initially experienced by curator Anita Jacobson in 1988. Describing her first walk through the empty building, Jacobson recalled, “It was as though people had just picked up and left. It was like a little time capsule.”<sup>84</sup> In order to preserve the decay that has occurred since the building’s abandonment in 1935, curators pin peeling wallpaper to the wall to prevent it from falling off. This visible intervention is evidence of the present-day use of the room, and reminds the visitor that the ruins apartment is neither exactly as it was in 1935, when it was abandoned, nor as it was in 1988, when it was re-opened by the museum. Rather, the apartment is an amalgam of its past and present uses, and plays a part in telling the story of the creation of the museum as well as the story of the history of 97 Orchard Street. One museum

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<sup>84</sup> Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story*, 12.



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docent noted that the ruin “serves as a reminder of the condition we found this place in...the blank canvas we had to work with. Here, you can see the various layers of human history.”<sup>85</sup>

The museum’s decision to leave the ruins apartment vacant was based in part on an interest in showing the physical layers of change in the building as reflective of the changing inhabitants and uses. Curator Steve Long recalled the concern of some historians that by restoring the building to specific periods the museum would erase the evidence that the building had been closed due to housing reforms, and eliminate the period of abandonment from the building’s history. Long stated:

We wanted to do both, on the one hand, to leave some rooms in a state of ruin, but on the other hand, to give visitors a sense of what these homes may have looked like, or at least our best guess of what they looked like based on our research. Leaving part of the building in a state of ruin lets the visitors understand there is change over time; and that these spaces are monuments.<sup>86</sup>

The image of the ruin can evoke for some the image of what once was, before the destructive effects of time altered the structure. M.W. Thompson stated that ruins appeal to us because they “stimulate our imagination and reconstruct in our mind’s eye the structure in its original state.”<sup>87</sup> Guides in the Tenement Museum offer visitors a glimpse of the ruin, stimulating their imaginations, and then complete the image of the past hinted at in the ruin by leading visitors to rooms in which the ruined dwelling has been restored to an “original” state. The ruins apartment serves as negative space,

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<sup>85</sup> Joel Ferree, Docent, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, conversation with author, 8 February 2002.

<sup>86</sup> Long, interview.

<sup>87</sup> M.W. Thompson, *Ruins: Their Preservation and Display* (London: Colonnade Books, 1981), 17.



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where visitors are allowed to picture for themselves what life was like in a tenement apartment. This empty stage, upon which visitors impose their own vision, precedes the theatrical displays visitors subsequently view in the recreated spaces of the museum.

The ruins apartment and the other interpreted apartments are presented as “time capsules,” frozen moments in the former tenants’ lives. As visitors move from room to room, they pass from one era to another, and glimpse tableaux of lives of immigrants of diverse ethnicities (see Figure 4). The concept of restoring rooms to an “original state” is a complex one at the Tenement Museum, since the interpretive rooms use representative examples of decorative arts rather than artifacts original to the site. The exception is the Baldizzi apartment, which benefited from the memory of Josephine Baldizzi Esposito, who lived in the apartment as a child and recalled for the museum curators the layout and furnishings of her family’s home, and contributed several family artifacts for use in the recreation of her childhood home.<sup>88</sup>

Whereas many historic house museums prize authenticity, at the Tenement Museum, the period rooms are used more as a mechanism to encourage visitors to think about contemporary issues than as a study in decorative arts. The fiction of the narratives is downplayed, though not denied. Curator Steve Long stated:

If we can get people to realize there is artifice to it then we’ve accomplished an enormous task. It’s difficult making people realize it is kind of make-believe.... Some visitors have pointed out, ‘You don’t really know it looks this way,’ and we encourage our tour guides to be very up front [about the artifice]. Unfortunately, the urban working

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<sup>88</sup> Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story*, 7.



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class material culture has not been preserved in the way that it has for more wealthy families.<sup>89</sup>

However, a frank acknowledgement of the artifice of the reconstructions may ultimately distract visitors from the narrative of the site, and during three site visits by the author the docents did not discuss the distinction between original and non-original elements in each apartment, or the fact that the apartments chosen for re-creations are not necessarily the apartments the families lived in.

The museum's diachronic storytelling may serve to underscore the absence of a knowable past by frankly presenting period rooms as stage sets. Critic Paul Philippot stated:

It is an illusion to believe that an object can be brought back to its original state by stripping it of all later additions. The original state is a mythical, unhistorical idea, apt to sacrifice works of art to an abstract concept and present them in a state that never existed.<sup>90</sup>

Yet the interpretation of the Tenement Museum does not frankly acknowledge whether the presentation of a theatrical substitute for a presumed reality is in fact a self-conscious rejection of the myth of an original state. Traditional house museums typically de-emphasize the fact that all interpretation of the past is ultimately a product of the present. However, at the Tenement Museum, the presentation of the ruins apartment as a “blank canvas” in some ways does frankly acknowledge the role of the museum staff as creative interpreters who impose their vision upon the site. The subsequent museum tour of diachronic room interpretations reinforces the diorama-like

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<sup>89</sup> Long, interview.

<sup>90</sup> Price, Talley, and Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 273.



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experience of walking through the museum. Each apartment presents a historical snapshot rather than a cohesive illumination of one family during one period, as is the case in most historic house museums. Allowing visitors to walk into and through the rooms in each apartment, rather than cordoning the rooms off and only allowing them to be seen through the doorway, reinforces the visitors' involvement in the displays, ultimately emphasizing that the visitors' responses to the site are as important to its interpretation as the artifacts on display.

The interpretation of each apartment is defined as the reconstruction of a specific month and year; in some rooms the docents even cited a specific day that is being interpreted. Rather than suggesting that the inhabitants' lives are so well documented that this level of specificity is possible in the historic interpretation of the apartments, the use of specific dates to create portraits of tenement families' lives may serve to emphasize the role each apartment plays as a stage set. Steve Long stated, "Focusing on a really specific story that took place on a particular day helps us in the recreation. We're guessing this is what happened on that particular day. Mainly we're interested in telling a story, not creating a carbon copy of what the home looked like."<sup>91</sup>

The primacy of the story is evident in the museum's newest tour of the recently constructed Levine apartment. The tour, called "Piecing It Together," focuses on the garment industry in New York. Although the Levine family, who lived in 97 Orchard Street at the turn of the century, is the subject of the tour, during a February 2002 tour by the author the docent focused on the garment industry's present as well as its past.

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<sup>91</sup> Long, interview.



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The tour began on the street outside 97 Orchard Street, where the docent pointed out sweatshops operating a few doors down from the tenement building. Compared to tours of the Tenement Museum taken by the author in 2000 and 2001, this tour placed a greater emphasis on contemporary issues. This is in keeping with what Steve Long characterized as the recent “redoubling” of the museum’s efforts to make connections between the past and the present. At the beginning of “Piecing It Together,” the docent noted:

One hundred years ago this area was the center of New York’s garment industry. Today, there are still more than one hundred garment factories in the area...today, we will address the questions: Where do consumers fit into the garment industry? And how do we approach the problems?<sup>92</sup>

These questions were addressed most directly in the first apartment visited by the tour: the ruins apartment, where the docent played pre-recorded voices of individuals involved in the garment industry today. This empty room served the purpose of setting the stage for the discussions about the garment industry to follow. Visitors were subsequently led to the Levine apartment, which was restored to November 1897, when Julia Levine was about to give birth to her third son. In the three-room apartment the rear bedroom is furnished as if used for garment work and in preparation for childbirth. Visitors were led through the kitchen and living area, where piece work and cut garments fill the rooms, while the docent described the long hours and uncomfortable conditions of working and living in an apartment also used as a sweatshop. The tour ended with a visit to the Rogarshevsky apartment, which is

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<sup>92</sup> Ferree, conversation with author.



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decorated according to Jewish mourning rituals, with the mirror covered and a mourning meal laid out on a table. The head of the family, Abraham Rogarshevsky, died of tuberculosis and was buried on July 14, 1918, the date to which the apartment is restored. The docent described the assistance the Rogarshevskys likely received from a mutual aid society, and concluded the tour by discussing the relevance of problems in the garment industry one hundred years ago to problems today: “Today, conditions in the garment industry are going backwards...as unions are losing their grip on the industry.”<sup>93</sup>

The Tenement Museum is currently researching the creation of a new installation featuring Irish immigrants who lived in 97 Orchard Street. In creating a new period apartment, the museum first considers a contemporary issue they are interested in exploring, and then researches that issue in the historical context of former inhabitants of 97 Orchard Street. In the case of Irish immigrants, the museum is interested in finding an Irish immigrant who was involved in the American Civil War, either as a soldier or as a war resister. Curator Steve Long noted:

Since September 11<sup>th</sup> it has become a cliché, but people are questioning what it means to be a patriot, and what it means to be loyal to your country. Many of the same kinds of issues were being raised 150 years ago when Irish immigrants were here in the largest numbers.<sup>94</sup>

By encouraging each visitor to connect the past to the present, and to consider the lives of the tenement dwellers through the lens of his or her own experience, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum may serve to challenge the implied narratives that

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Long, interview.



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visitors carry into 97 Orchard Street. In addition to creating a better understanding of the lives of immigrants today, the museum seeks to correct the myths of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century tenement dwelling. Steve Long commented:

One of the things that shocked me about walking into 97 Orchard Street was that I had read about the seamy underbelly of the city, and that the tenement was in effect the holding tank of this lowlife part of New York, and I came to find out that it's a much more interesting story. I was astounded by the paintings, use of wallpaper, the design we discovered on the ceiling, and all the decorative elements in the building.... For me that's one of the really terrific things about 97 Orchard—it complicates the idea that these are immigrants who are 'huddled masses.' They really do have a dignity and real ability to make a world for themselves.<sup>95</sup>

One of the Tenement Museum's primary missions is to promote tolerance. Their programs include teaching English to students who graduate by giving a tour of the museum in English, and include their own immigration experience as part of the tour.<sup>96</sup> When the Tenement Museum opened in 1988 the site managers created a fifty-seat storefront theatre for interpretive programming. The ancillary programs of the site include theatrical presentations, readings, and art exhibits, which all serve the Tenement Museum's mission. Community-centered programs include "Inspect This," which brings people into tenements with a checklist of legal obligations and laws to see if the buildings are up to code. The project seeks to foster awareness that tenements of varying condition are still inhabited today, and are not simply a part of America's immigrant past.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Liz Sevcenko, Vice-President of Programs, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, conversation with author, 28 June 2001.



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Although much of the Tenement Museum's programming focuses on involving the community in the history of immigration in the neighborhood and the relevance of the past to the present, the museum also has an international focus. Ruth Abram, interested in exchanging ideas and support with other historic sites addressing similar issues, formed a coalition in 1999 that includes the Tenement Museum and eight other members: the Gulag Museum in Russia, the District Six Museum in South Africa, the Terezin Memorial in the Czech Republic, the Slave House in Senegal, the Workhouse in England, Project to Remember in Argentina, the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh, and the National Park Service in the United States. Abram explained her interest in forming a coalition:

We want to wake people up. The reason we've come together is to really change the role of historic sites from one of passive history-telling to places of engagement for citizenship. So many museums are frightened that they're going to be the objects of great criticism if they take on any contemporary issues. One of the roles of the coalition is to create enough of a buzz to say to all those shrinking-violet curators: 'Don't worry, it's not going to undermine the mission of the museum, it's going to make it better.'<sup>97</sup>

Some of the member sites emphasize national reconciliation as one mission of their museum, while others seek greater awareness of human rights violations and government accountability rather than reconciliation.<sup>98</sup> The Tenement Museum

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<sup>97</sup> Julia M. Klein, "How Historic Sites Can Matter in the Here and Now," *New York Times*, 10 December 2000.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.



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emphasizes that the difficult conditions of the past can still be found in parts of the world today, and advocates using the “power of place” to confront these issues.<sup>99</sup>

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum seeks to broaden the concept of heritage to include the connections between immigrants of the past and those of today. To achieve this contemporary mission, the museum has created a conceptualization of history in which the story is paramount, acknowledging what historians Tunbridge and Ashworth characterized as the cultural construction of heritage: “...the nature of the heritage product is determined, as in all such market-driven models, by the requirements of the consumer not the existence of the resources...”<sup>100</sup> The museum’s diachronic interpretation of spaces acknowledges the artifice of the reconstruction of the past, while the decayed ruins apartment serves both as the blank canvas upon which stories are imposed and as testimony to the passage of time, making clear that the period of abandonment was significant in the history of the building. Historian Kevin Walsh noted of many museums:

Often the heritage display, with its denial of process, and its emphasis on the synchronous spectacle, removes any idea of change through time. The spectacle represents the isolated event; we are removed from history.<sup>101</sup>

By frankly acknowledging change over time, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum encourages visitors to recognize the links between the past and the present. Ultimately, the museum’s focus is on the present and the future, rather than the past. The

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<sup>99</sup> Sevcenko, conversation with author.

<sup>100</sup> Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*, 137.



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apartment reconstructions and theatrical presentations are a means to an end; they accomplish what Ruth Abram described as “putting history to work” by using history to engage the public in a dialogue about the present.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Abram, “Planting Cut Flowers,” 8-9.



B etween the creation of Manzanar War Relocation Center in 1942 and the creation of Manzanar National Historic Site in 1992 exists a gap in memory that is symbolized by the scattered vestiges of a complex of buildings that housed thousands of Japanese-Americans for four years during the Second World War. The almost complete erasure of the camp was followed by a similar erasure from public memory, as post-war Americans did little to acknowledge the displacement and internment of Japanese-Americans during the war.

In the current interpretation of Manzanar War Relocation Center as a historic site, the emotive power of the decay of the built environment is compromised by the fact that the history of the Japanese-American internment during World War II has been repressed in public consciousness to such a degree that some visitors fail to bring with them an implicit knowledge of the site's history. The site managers are currently planning some restoration and limited reconstruction of structures in the camp in order to fulfill their interpretive mission, which states:

Manzanar National Historic Site preserves the stories and resources of Manzanar for this and future generations. We will facilitate a park experience that weaves the stories of the various occupations of Manzanar faithfully, completely, and accurately. Manzanar National Historic Site will provide leadership for the protection and interpretation of associated sites. From this foundation, the park will stimulate and provoke a greater understanding of, and dialogue on civil rights, democracy, and freedom.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Frank Hays, Superintendent, Manzanar National Historic Site, interview by author, 2 April 2002.



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In 1935, the chief historian for the National Park Service described the organization's interpretive mission as "to recreate for the average citizen something of the color, the pageantry, and the dignity of our national past."<sup>104</sup> The National Park Service's perception of its role has changed considerably during its eighty-six-year history. Today, National Park Service historic sites, monuments, and parks such as the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, the Central High School National Historic Site in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail seek to commemorate darker periods in the American past. A member of the International Coalition of Site Museums of Conscience, the National Park Service's incorporation of difficult history into the national heritage is most obvious at Manzanar National Historic Site, where the National Park Service oversees the controversial interpretation of what is seen by many as one of the darkest hours in American history, with the complete suspension of the civil liberties of U.S. citizens who were singled out by their race. Addressing the question of the National Park Service's commemoration of sites of shame, Professor Robin Winks of Yale University commented:

With the recent addition of Manzanar National Historic Site to the National Park System, the public has been introduced more dramatically than ever before to a fundamental debate. Should the national parks commemorate and protect only places and events in which we take pride, or should the parks strive to mark events and places that many agree represent shameful episodes in our national experience?...

Each of the 367 units of the National Park System...has a unique mission, and each is to be interpreted so that visitors may comprehend the mission and attain a better understanding of American heritage...

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<sup>104</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 465.



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Education is best done with examples. These examples must include that which we regret, that which is to be avoided, as well as that for which we strive...If this premise is correct, we cannot omit the negative lessons of history.<sup>105</sup>

The events that led to the imprisonment of thousands of Japanese-American men, women, and children, most of whom were U.S. citizens, did not begin with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Racial disharmony on the west coast was widespread well before the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. Anti-immigrant sentiment coalesced in California's 1913 Alien Land Laws, which banned Japanese aliens from purchasing land, and the 1924 Immigration Act, which barred immigration from Japan into America.<sup>106</sup> After the United States declared war on Japan following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The February 19, 1942, act authorized the Secretary of War to "exclude citizens and aliens from designated areas along the Pacific Coast in order to provide security against sabotage and espionage."<sup>107</sup> The head of the Western Defense Command, Lt. General John L. DeWitt, organized the evacuation of Japanese-Americans from the coast beginning in March of that year. DeWitt wrote in February 1942:

The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on U.S. soil, possessed of U.S. citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Robin Winks, "Sites of Shame," *National Parks* 68 (March/April 1994): 22.

<sup>106</sup> John Hersey, "A Mistake of Terrifically Horrible Proportions," in *Manzanar*. John Armor and Peter Wright (New York: Times Books, 1988), 28. For a comprehensive history of Manzanar from 1942 to 1996, see Harlan D. Unrau, *The Evacuation and Relocation of Persons of Japanese Ancestry during World War II: A Historical Study of the Manzanar War Relocation Center*, 2 vols (Denver: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 1996).

<sup>107</sup> Unrau, *Evacuation and Relocation*, 1:xxv.

<sup>108</sup> Linda M. Rancourt, "Remembering Manzanar," *National Parks* 67, no. 5-6 (May/June 1993): 31.



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In May 1942, the government forced Japanese-Americans to gather in cities before relocating them to concentration camps under the authority of the War Relocation Authority, a newly created civilian agency.<sup>109</sup> Not charged with any crime, Japanese-Americans were forced to pack and dispose of all their belongings and property with only a few days notice. Japanese-Americans lost hundreds of millions of dollars in property and lost income as a result of the relocations. They were sent on trains, some with blacked-out windows and patrolled by armed guards, to interim assembly camps, which were located at racetracks and fairgrounds. After living in makeshift quarters or horse stalls, the prisoners were evacuated to permanent relocation camps. Approximately 110,000 people were exiled from their homes from 1942 to 1946. The “Trail of Tears,” President Andrew Jackson’s forced removal of more than 15,000 Cherokees from the eastern United States, offers the only precedent in U.S. history for such mass evacuation.<sup>110</sup>

Manzanar, one of ten camps created by Roosevelt’s order, was located 212 miles northeast of Los Angeles, at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California’s Owens Valley. The area was once home to Paiute and Shoshone Indians, who were driven off by white settlers in 1863. Named Manzanar by early Spanish settlers because of the apple orchards that once dotted the area, the land lost its value for settlers and ranchers when the area’s water supply was drained by the City of Los

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<sup>109</sup> Janice L. Dubel, “Remembering a Japanese-American Concentration Camp at Manzanar National Historic Site,” in *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Paul A. Shackel (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 88-89.

<sup>110</sup> Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 68; Winks, “Sites of Shame,” 22.



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Angeles in the late 1920s.<sup>111</sup> The Manzanar Relocation Center was established as the Owens Valley Reception Center, and was supervised by the U.S. Army's Wartime Civilian Control Administration (WCCA) before coming under the control of the War Relocation Authority (WRA). By mid-April 1942, 1,000 Japanese Americans were arriving at Manzanar each day; by July nearly 10,000 people inhabited the camp (see Figure 5).<sup>112</sup>

Living conditions in the 576 one-story pine barracks were cramped, and the region's climate offered harsh extremes of heat and cold. Prisoners were required to grow their own food, and cultivated the fields surrounding the camp and nurtured the fruit trees that still remain today.<sup>113</sup>

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memoir of her childhood years spent at Manzanar, *Farewell to Manzanar*, described the difficult living conditions that families encountered when they first arrived at the camp:

The simple truth is the camp was no more ready for us when we got there than we were ready for it. We had only the dimmest ideas of what to expect. Most of the families, like us, had moved out from southern California with as much luggage as each person could carry. Some old men left Los Angeles wearing Hawaiian shirts and Panama hats and stepped off the bus at an altitude of 4,000 feet, with nothing available but sagebrush and tarpaper to stop the April winds pouring down off the back side of the Sierras...the entire situation there, especially in the beginning—the packed sleeping quarters, the communal mess halls, the

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<sup>111</sup> Todd S. Purdum, "U.S. Starts to Dust Off a Dark Spot in History for All to See," *New York Times*, 20 June 1998.

<sup>112</sup> Jeffery F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord, *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999), chapter 8.

<sup>113</sup> Armor and Wright, *Manzanar*, xiii.



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open toilets—all this was an open insult to that other, private self, a slap in the face you were powerless to challenge.<sup>114</sup>

Photographer Ansel Adams visited the camp in 1943 and took photos of the site that reveal the everyday life of the camp's inhabitants and the beauty in the harsh landscape they inhabited (see Figure 7). In the introduction to his published book of photographs, *Born Free and Equal*, Adams wrote:

I believe that the arid splendor of the desert, ringed with towering mountains, has strengthened the spirit of the people of Manzanar.... From the harsh soil they have extracted fine crops; they have made gardens glow in the firebreaks and between the barracks. Out of the jostling, dusty confusion of the first bleak days in raw barracks they have modulated to a democratic internal society and a praiseworthy personal adjustment to conditions beyond their control.<sup>115</sup>

Adams' pictures showed the towering mountains, but he was forbidden by camp authorities from photographing the guard towers that also ringed the camp. *Born Free and Equal* found a limited audience, as numerous public book burnings greeted its publication in 1944.<sup>116</sup>

By the end of the war, many prisoners had already left the camp to enlist in the U.S. military or on professional work leaves. After the camp closed in November 1945 the barracks were disassembled and auctioned off to local veterans. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers bulldozed much of the complex in 1946. Camp director Ralph Merritt commented, "Manzanar is not being demolished—it is merely being

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<sup>114</sup> Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 25, 29.

<sup>115</sup> Armor and Wright, *Manzanar*, xvii.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.



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distributed.”<sup>117</sup> However, the “distribution” of Manzanar effectively effaced the site of a moment in American history that many of those involved wished to forget. The dismantling itself is a part of the site’s history; a period that is represented by the empty spaces of the site and ruined remains of the structures left in place (see Figures 6 and 8). Today, all that remains of the original site are the traces of rock gardens built by the prisoners, a sentry post, a guard post, and the camp auditorium.

In 1989, in an attempt to limit what they saw as an erasure of history, some historic preservationists advocated that portions of the Berlin Wall be spared the widespread dismantling and dispersion, so that vestiges of the Wall would remain as testimony to the Cold War-era in German history. However, one historian’s assessment that “in the future, the interest in this monument will be as much for its demolition by the people, as for its limited physical presence”<sup>118</sup> could be applied to Manzanar as well. The site’s dismantling and subsequent descent into ruins accurately reflects American attitudes toward the site as temporary and the events that took place there as outside the boundaries of national history. For those visitors who arrive to Manzanar National Historic Site with an understanding of the site’s past, the scattered vestiges speak volumes about the lack of national attention to the temporary, forgotten city in the desert. However, for those visitors who lack an implicit knowledge of the events, the ruins and gardens in their natural setting, framed by mountains, may

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<sup>117</sup> Dubel, “Remembering a Japanese-American Concentration Camp,” 95; Christopher Ross, “Return to Manzanar,” *Americana Magazine* 19, no. 1 (March-April 1991): 56.

<sup>118</sup> Gill Chitty and David Baker, *Managing Historic Sites and Buildings: Reconciling Presentation and Preservation* (London: Routledge, 1999), 177.



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become picturesque, barely evoking the former presence of built structures. Michael Roth suggested that in the wake of the Second World War, the contemplative gaze prompted by ruins may be a thing of the past:

The sentimental attachment to the ruin, the contemplative gaze that finds some sign of renewal in nature's growth on a broken stone, has been shaken, diverted. The promise of understanding the past and of the renewal or even redemption that this understanding might provide seems empty or a lie in the wake of the extremities (and the threat of nuclear annihilation) that turned a world into (potential) ruins.<sup>119</sup>

Although the ruins of Manzanar may or may not sufficiently convey an idea of the site's history, most conservators today are wary of the excessive reconstruction of buildings.<sup>120</sup> The fragments of the former internment camp cover several acres. The National Park Service report *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* cataloged what remains at Manzanar:

Only three of the over 800 buildings originally at the relocation center remain. However, there is abundant evidence of relocation center features, including walls, foundations, sidewalks, steps, manholes, sewer and water lines, landscaping features, ditches, and trash concentrations. Much of the relocation center road grid remains, but many of the roads in the western third are buried by alluvium or overgrown with vegetation. Other roads are cut by gullies and major portions of two roads (1st and 7th Streets) have been destroyed by gully erosion. By far the most prevalent artifact types at the site are window and bottle glass fragments and wire nails. However, a tremendous variety of artifacts dating to the relocation center use are scattered across the central area.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Roth, Lyons, and Merewether, *Irresistible Decay*, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Price, Talley, and Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 204.

<sup>121</sup> Burton, et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity*, chapter 8.



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Also remaining on the site is the monument to the dead in Manzanar's cemetery. The monument is a large, white obelisk with Japanese inscriptions on both sides. The translation of the east side reads: "Monument to console the souls of the dead." The other side reads: "Erected by the Manzanar Japanese August 1943."<sup>122</sup> This memorial is now the site of an annual pilgrimage that began in 1969, when hundreds of Japanese-American students and former prisoners visited the site.

The annual pilgrimage contributed to the coalescence of interest in commemorating the events that took place on the site during the Second World War. Manzanar first received official recognition of its historic value in 1972, when the site was nominated to become a California Registered Historic Landmark. At that time, controversy arose over the use of the term "concentration camp" on the historic plaque at the site. The Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee preferred to substitute the term "relocation center." Two Japanese-American advocacy groups presented evidence of the function of the camp that convinced the Committee of the accuracy of the term "concentration camp," and the text ultimately approved for the historic plaque included both phrases:

In the early part of World War II, 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were interned in relocation centers by Executive Order No. 9066, issued on February 19, 1942. Manzanar, the first of ten such concentration camps, was bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons, the majority being American citizens. May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Nadine Ishitani Hata, *The Historic Preservation Movement in California 1940-1976* (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1992), 169-172.



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The controversy over language persists; as recently as 1998 an exhibit mounted at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum called “America’s Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese-American Experience” provoked debate among curators, Ellis Island officials, and some Jewish groups who argued that the use of the term “concentration camp” diluted its meaning.<sup>124</sup> After meetings between curators at the Japanese American National Museum, which organized the exhibition, and representatives of the American Jewish Committee, both sides agreed upon language to be inserted in the exhibit program and displays explaining to the public the complex associations of the term “concentration camp.” The text pointed out the differences between Nazi concentration camps and American concentration camps, and concluded, “All had one thing in common: the people in power decided to remove a minority group from the general population, and the rest of society let it happen.”<sup>125</sup>

Manzanar was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985 amidst increasing recognition of the site’s importance in American history. “Manzanar is a symbolic reminder that a nation of laws needs constantly to honor the concept of freedom and the rights of its citizens,” said David Simon, natural resources program manager for the National Parks and Conservation Association.<sup>126</sup> However, the former prisoners at Manzanar did not receive an official apology from the U.S. government until 1988, when President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Civil Rights Act, which

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<sup>124</sup> Somini Sengupta, “What Is a Concentration Camp? Ellis Island Exhibit Prompts a Debate,” *New York Times*, 8 March 1998.

<sup>125</sup> Somini Sengupta, “Accord on Term ‘Concentration Camp,’” *New York Times*, 10 March 1998.

<sup>126</sup> Rancourt, “Remembering Manzanar,” 30.



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authorized a \$1.25 billion settlement to surviving internees or their heirs.<sup>127</sup> In 1992, President George Bush signed into law an act of Congress creating Manzanar National Historic Site, which was authorized to “provide for the protection and interpretation of the historical, cultural, and natural resources associated with the relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II.”<sup>128</sup> The law also established the Manzanar National Historic Site Advisory Commission in order to involve local community members in the interpretation of the site. The Advisory Commission is composed of local residents, the general public, Native Americans and Japanese-American former internees.<sup>129</sup>

The question of how much of the internment camp to reconstruct in order to fully dramatize the historical lessons of the site has been a contentious issue for the National Park Service and for the Advisory Commission. Some members of the Japanese-American community involved in commemoration at Manzanar would like the reconstruction of certain camp elements, particularly a guard fence, to make explicit the structures of authority in place at the camp.<sup>130</sup> Superintendent Frank Hays commented on the interpretive challenges created by the site’s state of ruin:

There is little but sagebrush and dust remaining of the internment camp. Without these physical reminders it is difficult to explain to visitors that this was indeed an internment camp.... When you visit Manzanar today, you can be so inspired by the location’s beauty that you miss the important story told there. In fact, some visitors have mentioned that because of the location near such beautiful mountains that the camp

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<sup>127</sup> Dubel, “Remembering a Japanese-American Concentration Camp,” 98.

<sup>128</sup> Unrau, *Evacuation and Relocation*, 1:xxv.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 2:828.

<sup>130</sup> National Park Service, “The National Park Service and Civic Dialogue.”



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experience couldn't have been so bad. The camp has been likened to a summer camp in the mountains rather than an internment camp that has an important story of civil rights to tell.<sup>131</sup>

However, many advocates of the passage of the 1992 bill establishing Manzanar as a historic site recommended a cautious approach to reconstruction. Jerry Rogers, the National Park Service Associate Director for Cultural Resources, testified in support of the creation of the historic site:

I personally found when I was at the site that the most evocative feature of the site is the extensive remains of landscaping work, stone walkways, planting beds, walls, and modified landforms that had been done by the internees in an effort to beautify and make more comfortable their harsh desert environment. I also believe that the almost transient nature of the remaining resources, that is to say, of the camp itself, the buildings gone, the remnants blown over by sand—I find in that a metaphor for this whole point of this being a lesson, but not something we want to be prominent in American society—a lesson that we can learn from...

...we also would like to emphasize...that we would intend only minimum development at the National Historic Site if it were authorized, and we would instruct our planners that there would be no reconstruction, in whole or in part, of the fencing, the guard tower or barracks and no attempt to recreate the scene that has disappeared. In our opinion, the authenticity of the site speaks far more powerfully than anything we could create by building imitations of the historic buildings that were there or by moving in some buildings that have been taken away.<sup>132</sup>

Despite Rogers' recommendations, the General Management Plan for the site, approved by the National Park Service in 1997, proposed the reconstruction of some elements of the internment camp in order to interpret the site's use as a relocation

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<sup>131</sup> Frank Hays, "The Role of Civic Dialogue in Management of Manzanar National Historic Site" (paper presented at the workshop "National Park Service and Civic Dialogue," New York, NY, December 2001).

<sup>132</sup> Unrau, *Evacuation and Relocation*, 1:829-830.



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center during World War II. The National Park Service is currently attempting to balance the demands of fulfilling the site's interpretive mission and the demands of authenticity. Superintendent Frank Hays noted that the National Park Service does allow reconstruction in some circumstances:

Reconstruction...is one of four treatment options for historic sites including preservation, rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction. Reconstruction represents the alternative with the least historic authenticity and is defined as 'the depiction of one period in history using new materials based on archaeology and other research findings.' The National Park Service discourages reconstructions for many excellent reasons.... The National Park Service will not reconstruct a missing structure unless there is no alternative that would accomplish the park's interpretive mission, there is sufficient data to enable an accurate reconstruction, the reconstruction occurs on the original location, and the reconstruction is approved by the NPS director. This is the case that the Japanese American community and others used to guide the direction of the park's General Management Plan.<sup>133</sup>

The Japanese-American community strongly advocated the reconstruction of certain icons of authority such as the perimeter fence and a guard tower, and the General Management Plan was influenced by the input of the Manzanar Advisory Commission and Japanese-American groups. Although the General Management Plan initially presented a no-action alternative and a minimum requirements alternative that proposed no reconstruction, these alternatives were rejected in favor of the reconstruction proposals.<sup>134</sup> The site auditorium is to be converted to an interpretive center, and the camp road system and some rock gardens and ponds will also be rehabilitated. A Save America's Treasures grant, with matching funds from the State of

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<sup>133</sup> Hays, "Role of Civic Dialogue."

<sup>134</sup> Unrau, *Evacuation and Relocation*, 1:833.



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California, was allocated to the restoration of the perimeter fence and entry sign, and the creation of an interpretive auto tour road adjacent to fence. Superintendent Hays commented on the restoration of buildings to the site:

We are working with Inyo County to bring back a former mess hall to the site. We will then see what other buildings we can bring back. We will reconstruct buildings as a last resort—we do know we will have to reconstruct a guard tower—since no original guard towers remain.<sup>135</sup>

Restoration efforts are ongoing, and in 2001 the National Park Service budget allocated more than \$5 million to the establishment of an Interpretive Center and Headquarters at Manzanar, to be housed within the former auditorium.<sup>136</sup> After the prison camp closed, Inyo County purchased the auditorium and leased it to the Independence Veterans of Foreign Wars, who used it as a meeting hall and community theater until 1951. The camp auditorium continued to be used for municipal purposes until 1996, when the National Park Service purchased the building.<sup>137</sup> Although the primary period of significance to be interpreted at the site is the period of Japanese-American internment, the Visitors Center exhibits to be displayed in the restored auditorium will also acknowledge the longer history of the area. The Secretary of the Interior's Report to the President identified interpretive themes for the Visitors Center that included the history of the internment period and its connection to racism in the United States; the challenge of balancing constitutional rights with national security; the history of water use in the western United States; and the history of the successive

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<sup>135</sup> Hays, interview.

<sup>136</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report to the President: Japanese-American Internment Sites Preservation* (U.S. Department of the Interior, January 2001).

<sup>137</sup> Burton, et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity*, chapter 8.



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displacements of Native Americans, white settlers, and Japanese-Americans by more powerful groups.<sup>138</sup> The site managers also plan to dedicate a portion of the exhibits to contemporary issues.<sup>139</sup>

The Visitors Center's inclusive programmatic agenda responded to the community's perception of Manzanar as a contested space. The increased regional and national recognition of the site led to protests by some groups and individuals who disputed that Japanese-Americans were held against their will at the camp. These proponents of a revisionist history of the site claimed that the guard towers were actually used as fire watchtowers, and that fences around the compound were only used to keep cattle out, not to confine people within. National Park Service senior historian Gordon Chappell noted that the revisionists cited as evidence historic photographs that fail to show barbed wire, sentry posts, or armed guards. "The War Relocation Authority made a strenuous effort to limit what could be photographed, because it wanted to present the camp experience as more benign than was in fact the case," Chappell said. "It prohibited any photographs of the sentries or the sentry towers or the military guards."<sup>140</sup> One revisionist claimed, "The Park Service is heading in the wrong un-American direction that will wind up in several resignations along with another Enola Gay incident."<sup>141</sup> Whereas the Smithsonian Institution cancelled their 1995 exhibit "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," which

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<sup>138</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report to the President*.

<sup>139</sup> Hays, interview.

<sup>140</sup> Martin Forstenzer, "Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at Camp," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 1996.

<sup>141</sup> Robert A. Jones, "Whitewashing Manzanar," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 April 1996.



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featured the Enola Gay, after protests by veterans groups, the site managers at Manzanar National Historic Site have not allowed their interpretation to be influenced by these revisionists' threats. Superintendent Frank Hays stated in April 2002 that local opposition to the historic site seemed to be waning, while "many community members have embraced the park and are excited to see development finally occurring."<sup>142</sup>

The commemoration of the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War raises strong emotions for both those who were imprisoned and those who deny the validity of the National Park Service's historic interpretations. The town of Independence, several miles from Manzanar, has witnessed the conflicts between different factions, and after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., demonstrated an awareness of the lessons of local and national history when the Independence Town Council passed a resolution affirming tolerance of Arab-Americans. At that time, the United States Justice Department had proposed restrictions on the rights of immigrants suspected of terrorist activity. Many civil libertarians became alarmed at the potential for violations of immigrants' constitutional rights. In a September 24, 2001, *New York Times* article, Jeanne A. Butterfield, executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, claimed, "Under these provisions there is a much bigger danger than we have ever seen in our history of innocent people being rounded up and held on

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<sup>142</sup> Hays, interview.



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suspicion that they did something and never having their day in court.”<sup>143</sup> Legal scholars looked to a Supreme Court decision that still stands upholding the internments of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. In 1944, Fred Korematsu was convicted for refusing to report to an assembly center. In *Fred Korematsu v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court approved the relocations as a wartime hardship. University of California at Los Angeles law professor Jerry Kang said: “Some people say we’ve learned the lesson from *Korematsu* and we would never do that again. I’m much more skeptical, I think there is a chance we would do that again.”<sup>144</sup>

The lesson of *Korematsu* and the commemoration of this period of shame are not limited to the prison camp sites themselves. To commemorate this era in America’s national heritage, Japanese-Americans have funded a memorial to be built in Washington, D.C. The National Japanese American Memorial will be represented by two sculpted cranes, one trapped in barbed wire symbolic of the fences of the internment camps, and the other aloft in flight. The director of the memorial, Cherry Tsutsumida, stated, “This memorial celebrates the fact that our great democracy did finally admit that it did a great wrong.”<sup>145</sup>

The National Japanese American Memorial, sited at the seat of power of the United States government, uses the symbolism of the prison camp to convey the lessons of the past. At Manzanar, site managers continue to seek a balance between

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<sup>143</sup> William Glaberson, “War on Terrorism Stirs Memory of Internment,” *New York Times*, 24 September 2001.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Francis X. Clines, “A Memorial Addresses a Wrong,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1999.



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symbol and interpretation in their curatorial decisions about the level of reconstruction of the site. Some visitors are able to witness the ruins of the former prison camp and reconstruct in their own imagination the shameful episodes of the past. For others, the scattered remains of the site may not be evocative of the past. One National Park Service Superintendent remarked upon the effect the unreconstructed ruins of the former camp may have on visitors. Ed Rothfuss, then Superintendent of Death Valley National Monument, noted in 1993:

Manzanar has a subtle interpretive character about it. I think it is important to be able to walk through and think about the people living there. You can watch the sagebrush and the sand drifting and let your mind creep and think about what happened.<sup>146</sup>

Whether the subtlety of this interpretation will remain once certain elements of the camp are reconstructed is still undetermined. Yet, it is likely that many visitors will still see the meaning amidst the ruins and reconstructions that Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston noted in her return to the camp years after her incarceration there as a child.

In *Farewell to Manzanar* she wrote:

The old road was disintegrating, split, weed-sprung. We poked through the remains of hospital foundations, undermined by erosion channels. We found concrete slabs where the latrines and shower rooms stood, and irrigation ditches, and here and there, the small rock arrangements that once decorated many of the entranceways....It is so characteristically Japanese, the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human. These rock gardens had outlived the barracks and the towers and would surely outlive the asphalt road and rusted pipes and shattered slabs of concrete. Each stone was a mouth, speaking for a family, for some man who had beautified his doorstep.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Rancourt, "Remembering Manzanar," 46.

<sup>147</sup> Houston and Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar*, 166.



If “every historic site tells two different stories about two different eras in the past,”<sup>148</sup> both the moment of the events being commemorated and the moment of commemoration, then the sites studied here tell an additional story, that of the gap in between history and historicizing, during which neglect led to decay, abandonment to ruin. As an increasing number of American historic sites acknowledge that the dark moments of the past define national heritage just as celebratory moments do, and have resonance in the present and the future, that gap begins to close.

Historian Arthur Neal noted:

Traumatic events of the recent past are important ingredients of our social heritage and continue to convey implications for the prospects and limits of the world in which we live.<sup>149</sup>

Just as the interpretation of the events commemorated is influenced by the moment of commemoration, ruins tell stories about two different moments: the imagined original state of the building, as seen in the viewer’s mind’s eye, and the present state of decay. The ruin itself is not simply a deteriorated building, but takes on a new identity through its interpretation by the viewer. Georg Simmel stated:

What has led the building upward is human will; what gives it its present appearance is the brute, downward-dragging, corroding, crumbling power of nature. Still, so long as we can speak of a ruin at all and not a mere heap of stones, this power does not sink the work of man into the formlessness of mere matter. There rises a new form which, from the standpoint of nature, is entirely meaningful, comprehensible,

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<sup>148</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 36.

<sup>149</sup> Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, x.



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differentiated. Nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served as material for art.<sup>150</sup>

The three sites discussed in this study acknowledge that the expression of the passage of time in the built environment allows for a more complex understanding of the history of the sites. In contrast, historian Paul Philippot criticized Independence Hall in Philadelphia for its meticulous reconstruction, in which “past and present are...brought together on the same level with no depth of field whatsoever.” He argued that the fundamental problem of restoration is this lack of distance between past and present:

An authentic relationship with the past must not only recognize the unbridgeable gap that has formed, after historicism, between us and the past; it must also integrate this distance into the actualization of the work produced by the intervention.<sup>151</sup>

Allowing decay to remain a fundamental part of the site, and including the decay within the sites’ interpretations, acknowledges this unbridgeable gap. At sites of uncomfortable history, acknowledging this distance may allow visitors to correlate that gap with the abandonment of the site, and its temporary exclusion from public memory.

Sites of memory typically face multiple demands: pressure from tourists to make the sites engaging, pressure from those who share in a collective memory of the site to make the site authentic, and pressure from visitors to the site who seek to have

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<sup>150</sup> Kurt H. Wolff, ed. *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy, and Aesthetics* (New York: Harper, 1965), 261-262, quoted in Roth, Lyons, and Merewether, *Irresistible Decay*, 44.

<sup>151</sup> Price, Talley, and Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 225.



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their group identity commemorated within the site. By negotiating a balance between the theatrical and symbolic uses of decay, the reconstruction of ruined buildings, and contemporary interpretation, the three sites studied here communicate historical narratives that encourage visitors to view the present through the lens of the past.

Ultimately, the power of decay lies in the eye of the beholder. Site managers at each of the three sites studied here effectively use decay in different ways to stage their interpretive programs at the site. At Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and Manzanar National Historic Site, the sites' decay allows for the recognition of absence and the passage of time. It is this open acknowledgment of the unbridgeable gap between us and the past that allows these ruins of our shared history to speak to the present.



### Eastern State Penitentiary

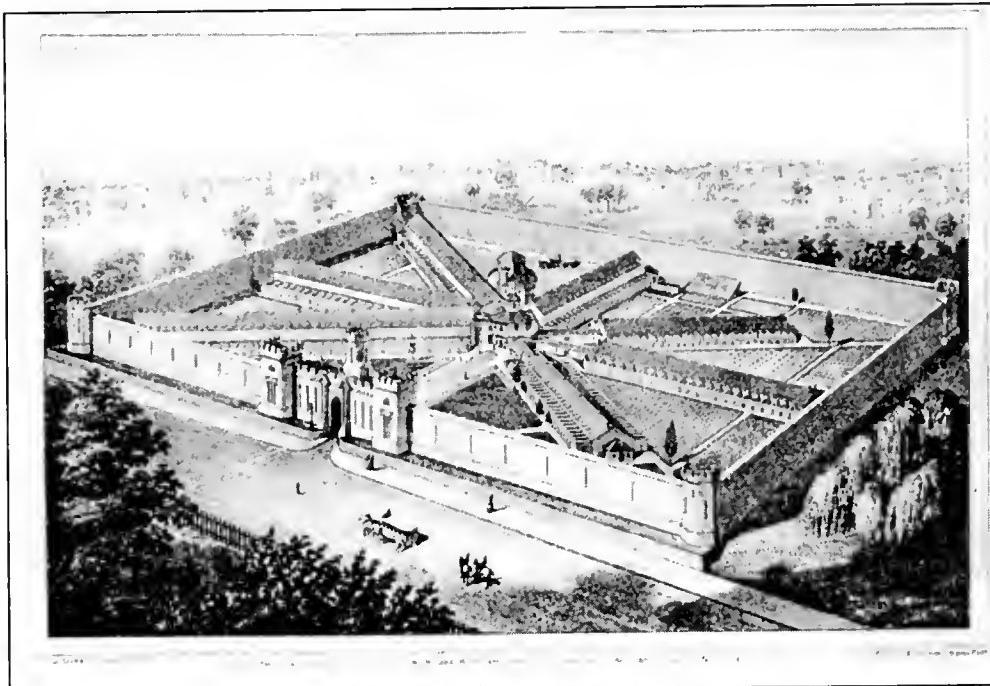


Figure 1: Samuel Cowperthwaite, convict number 2954, The State Penitentiary, for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 1855. Lithograph by P.S. Duval and Co. The Library Company of Philadelphia.





**Figure 2: Interior cell block, Eastern State Penitentiary, 2001. Photograph by Kate Daly.**



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## Lower East Side Tenement Museum



Figure 3: The ruins apartment, 1999. Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.





**Figure 4:** The front room of the Gumpertz apartment recreated to circa 1878, photographed in 1999. Collection of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.



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## Manzanar National Historic Site



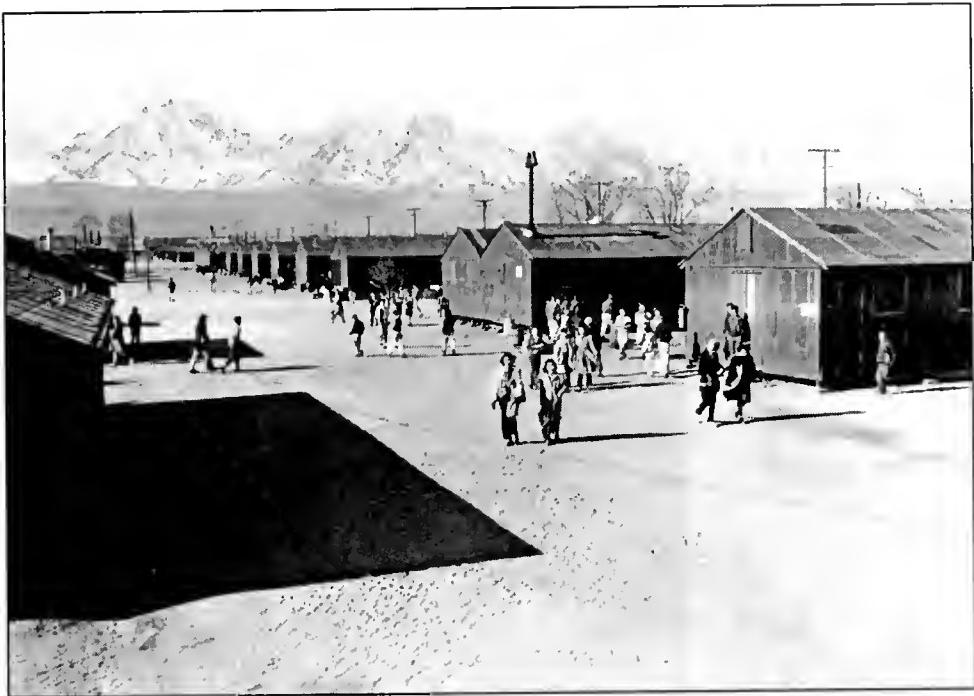
**Figure 5: Entry sign, 1943, Manzanar War Relocation Center. Ansel Adams Photographs, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.**





**Figure 6: Entry sign, 1999.** Photograph in *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, by Jeffery F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord.





**Figure 7: High School Recess Period, 1943, Manzanar War Relocation Center. Ansel Adams**  
**Photographs, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.**





**Figure 8: Manzanar barracks foundations, 1999.** Photograph in *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, by Jeffery F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord.



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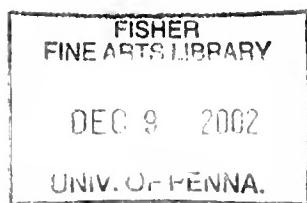
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